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By Peter Field

First Magazine Publication

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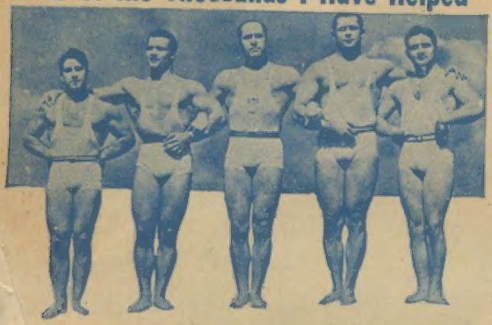

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WESTERN ACTION

TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 10 **Dec. 1945** **Number 3**

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

(First Magazine Publication)

MIDNIGHT ROUND-UP . . . . . By Peter Field 10

More deadly than owlhooters and range wars was the sinister conspiracy of Judge Prink and his cohorts to despoil Powder Valley. And against his master plot, there stood only Pat Stevens and his saddle-pards Sam Sloan and One-Eyed Ezra. Only this seemed to be a situation which couldn't be cleared up swiftly and cleanly by gunsmoke!

SHORT STORIES

THE PLACE WHERE HELL FROZE OVER By V. Crawford 80

Stranger than fiction are some of these true accounts of boom towns in the old West.

LAWMAN'S PRIDE . . . . . By Gunnison Steele 82

Sheriff Tate needed the money that these outlaws were willing to let him have, but . . .

DECISION AT SUNDOWN . . . . . By T. W. Ford 87

When Ed walked out onto the street to meet this rash button who had challenged him, the past began to unfold itself again . . .

MAKE WAY FOR A GUNMAN . . . . . By Cliff Campbell 91

Jim Falcon had brought law and peace to the town once, but now he was too old and there was nothing but his belief in fate . . .

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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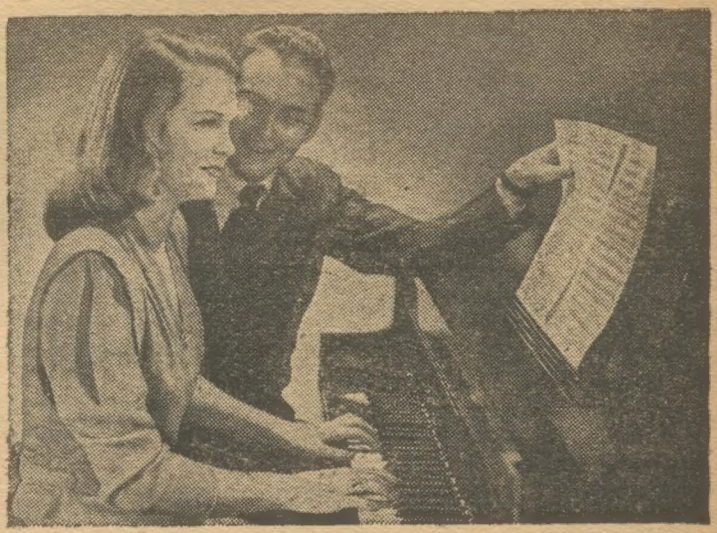
says Mrs. Phyllis B. Jones, Blanding, Utah.



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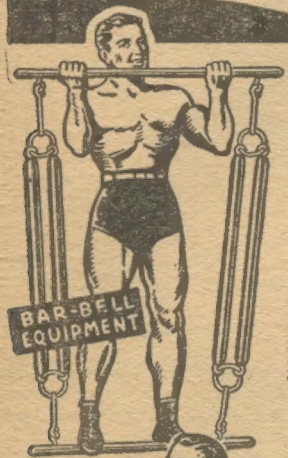

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SINISTER FORCES PLOT TO DESPOIL POWDER VALLEY IN

MIDNIGHT ROUND-UP

First Magazine Publication of This Unusual Book-Length Novel

By Peter Field

"Shall we drink to the division of the spoils — to Powder Valley, one year from now when we've drained it dry?" Prink raised his glass.

***Only** Pat Stevens, Sam Sloan, and One-Eyed Ezra stood between the infamous J. Worthington Prink, and his confederates, and a master plan to control and loot Powder Valley!*

IT WAS early dusk, the end of a drowsy Sunday afternoon in Denver, Colorado. Downtown Larimer Street was beginning to stretch itself and wake up; gas chandeliers were lighted in the saloons, making deceptive blobs of cheery brightness along the tawdry street.

In the Black Angel Saloon the swinging doors began to creak as darkness came on and newcomers sought the light and human companionship within. They were mostly a dreary lot; bearded miners from the hills above the city; booted cowmen at the tag-end of a week-end; the shuffling, pallid dregs of a young and exuberant metropolis—with a

sprinkling of painted ladies who emerged from hiding with the coming of night and began circulating in and out of the Larimer Street saloons in search of men with money to spend on them.

The Black Angel was one of the more ornate drinking places of the district, offering, in addition to bright lights and cheap whiskey, what was boldly billed in window signs as "The Best Floor Show in the City FREE—Continuous Music and Entertainment."

There was a small raised platform in the back of the barroom, with a shabby black velvet curtain draped behind it as a backdrop. There were two wooden chairs in front of the platform, with a piano standing off to one side. As the early evening crowd began to thicken at the bar, the entertainers came out from the back to fulfill the promise made by the signs.

The wizened pianist rippled the keys and tinny melody came out. The accordion player and violinist went to work without enthusiasm, conscientiously making enough noise to filter out through the swinging doors in the hope of luring any passers-by inside.

No one applauded when they finished the number; no one paid much attention to them or to the music. Then the black velvet curtain parted and a girl stepped out onto the small wooden platform. She had a slender figure and wore a shimmering silvery dress that looked good against the black velvet. Blond hair was piled in small tight curls high atop her head, giving her a sort of regal appearance. In the soft yellow lights of flickering gas jets she looked young and vital. There was a little stir among the men at the bar as they nudged each other and turned to look, and they gave her the respect of near silence as she sang *Comin' thru the Rye* with gestures. She had a small light voice, big enough for the saloon and good enough for that company. There was some applause when she finished, and she smiled and threw kisses out to them and sang *My Old Kentucky Home* for an encore.

This drew more applause, and she gave out with more smiles and a more generous assortment of thrown kisses.

A TALL man separated himself from the others at the bar and went back toward her. He was bareheaded, with soft-silvery hair and a benign, red-veined face. He had a bulbous nose and watery blue eyes and four of his front teeth were missing. He wore a rusty black coat over stooped shoulders, and he shuffled along in worn Congress gaiters.

Connie Dawson was half-turned to disappear between the velvet curtains when she saw him coming. She hesitated, with a frown making three deep wrinkles between her eyes. The musical trio was playing an uninspired version of *The Blue Danube*, and three or four couples began waltzing in the small space at the rear of the bar.

Connie Dawson said brightly, "Hello, Tim. I suppose your boss sent you over to see if he can hire me away from Brick Gleason!" She showed her white teeth in a smile, and her tone was brightly bantering but nonetheless hopeful.

Timothy O'Connor stopped beside the platform and shook his head. He was a hanger-on and general handy man at the Cambridge Hotel. He said, "I'm sorry, Miss Connie. The Cambridge could use your singin' all right, but the boss is old-fashioned, sorta. He don't hold with these new-fangled ways of gettin' business. Nope. The Jedge sent me."

The frown wrinkled Connie's face again. She blinked long eyelashes down to hide the fear that sprang momentarily into her eyes. "Judge Prink, Timothy? What does he want?"

"I dunno, Miss Connie. I was to tell you to see him when you're done here. About midnight. The Jedge has got a soot at the hotel," Timothy O'Connor went on importantly. "You know how he is when he's got big business up his sleeve."

"Yes," Connie said slowly, "I know." She caught her underlip be-

tween her teeth and looked tired and a little frightened. "All right," she agreed flatly. "I'll be there."

The well-dressed and well-bred congregation of the Park Hill Baptist Church was standing in the pews singing the second verse of the last hymn preceding the sermon. Shaded gas lights cast a rich soft glow over the interior of the church, giving colorful reflections back from the stained glass windows. His parishioners were the wealthiest in the city, and the rotund figure of the Reverend Ezekial Mathews exuded reverent satisfaction as he waited for the hymn to end so he could give his blessing to the important business of taking up the evening collection.

"Pat" Stevens

A black-garbed figure stood at the rear end of each of the four aisles waiting for his benediction on the silver collection plates in their hands. The man at the left center aisle bowed his bald head as the hymn was ended. There was a fringe of very black hair around his baldness, and heavy black sideburns extended far down on his cheeks. He had stern features and thin, tight lips; stingy parishioners had a way of quailing before his steady glance and putting more in the collection plate than they had intended to give.

Tonight Daniel Deever listened patiently as the minister concluded and the congregation sat down. He waited a moment to give those in the back row ample opportunity to get out their wallets and open their bags; then he stepped forward with a slight limp and handed

Ezra

Sam Sloan

his collection plate to the occupant of the first pew on his right.

The plate was passed on from hand to hand, while a second plate was coming toward Deever from the back row at his left, and a third one was making its way toward his aisle along the second row on his right.

There was thick silence in the church, broken only by the comforting sound of silver tinkling into the four collection plates as they were passed from hand to hand.

Daniel Deever waited patiently until the first plate from his left reached him. There was a rather disappointing collection of dimes and quarters, with a few silver dollars and one bill. He took the plate in his hands and took one slow step forward while his nimble fingers abstracted two of the silver dollars, leaving the others and the bill for bait as he sent the plate back along the second row to his left.

He folded his arms genteelly, sliding the two dollars unobstrusively into the right-hand pocket of his black frock coat; then received the plate from the second row at his right. This time there were three bills and more silver dollars. One of the bills was a five. He opened that out and left it so it could be plainly seen, lifting one of the dollar bills and three silver cartwheels at the same time.

His manner was grave as he continued this process, limping forward a step at a time and lightening each plate as it passed through his hands.

By the time Daniel Deever reached the front row, both side pockets of his coat were beginning to bulge a little, and the garment sagged comfortably from his broad shoulders. He waited impassively until his three fellow collectors were ready, then the four of them marched past the minister, pausing momentarily to show off their spoils, then proceeding to a small anteroom where all the plates were dumped and the evening receipts were totaled up.

In this totaling-up process, Daniel Deever had his first chance at the farthest right-hand plate which had not reached his predatory fingers previously, and tonight he was lucky enough to palm a five and a ten-dollar bill.

Altogether it was a good evening, and Daniel Deever let himself out by a side entrance while the sermon was still in progress.

TIMOTHY O'CONNOR was flattened against the side of the church when Deever emerged. Deever whirled on the indistinct figure and threw both big bony fists up when O'Connor took a tentative step forward. He relaxed when the barroom loafer whined, "It's only me, Dan'l. Old Tim. I been waitin' for you."

"Timothy?" Deever lowered his voice, restraining his anger. "You shouldn't come here. Suppose someone saw you speak to me?"

"No one seen me." Timothy fell into step beside the taller limping figure. "The Jedge sent me. He wants to see you tonight."

"The Judge? Can you refer to Judge Prink?"

"That's right." Timothy chuckled. "J. Worthington his ownself. He blowed into town this afternoon an' set hisself up in a soot at the Cambridge. Sent word for you to see him tonight."

"I don't need his help," Daniel Deever protested. "What does the fat old goat want of me?"

"I dunno. Got somethin' up his sleeve, I reckon. Should I tell him you'll come?"

"Tell him," said Daniel Deever with austerity, "that I am pleased to accept his invitation though I'm not in need of legal advice."

IN A SMALL iron-barred cell at the Denver city jail, Mr Gut-Luck Lasher sat hunched forward on the edge of a canvas cot while he expertly rolled a brown-paper cigarette. Gut-Luck was depressed this Sunday evening. He had been in jail for a week and the future looked uncertain. His bail had been set at the exorbitant sum of one hundred dol-

lars, and he was without money or friends.

All for a simple killing on Larimer Street. Denver was a funny place, he cogitated moodily. It had been a fair and square shooting. All the twenty-odd killings in Gut-Luck's past had been fair and square. He prided himself on always giving the other man the break. Let them reach first; any time he couldn't blast them in the belly quicker than they could draw and get him—well, that'd be the end of Gut-Luck. Up to now, during the first twenty-five years of his life, Gut-Luck hadn't run up against a man fast enough with his six-gun to accomplish that feat.

He had become a killer and gotten his nickname in a curious way. It happened when he was seventeen, in El Paso, Texas. There was a saloon altercation that ended with one of the fastest gun-slicks in the border city calling him outside. Tom Lasher walked out to his destiny, dry-mouthed and weak-kneed with fear. While his opponent drew, the youth blunderingly dropped hand to gun-butt and unwittingly fingered the trigger.

He was more astonished than anyone else when the professional gunman vented a surprised grunt and collapsed, twitching, in the El Paso gutter. He didn't die for two days, but the slug had momentarily paralyzed him so he couldn't return the young puncher's lucky shot.

An old doctor who happened to be on the scene explained the phenomenon to Lasher, and thus changed the course of his life. "Always shoot for the guts, son," the aged physician advised him. "It's a big target, and a slug anywhere in the belly is something like a blow in the solar plexus. It knocks them out though it may not kill. You can take a bullet most any place else and keep on shooting, but not there."

IT WAS as simple as that. He cut the bottom out of his holster and mounted it on a swivel. A little practice taught him a downward sweep that would beat any draw, and the target was too big to miss. His first bullet always gave him plenty of leisure to finish off any man foolish enough to draw against him.

But he was a stranger in Denver, having just drifted up from Arizona, and friends of Lefty Breen had called the police after Gut-Luck calmly put a bullet through Lefty's head while the gunman was writhing on the ground.

Gut-Luck sighed and lighted his cigarette. He didn't pay any attention when he heard a turnkey coming along the aisle toward his cell. He didn't know anyone in the city who might put up bail for him, and was resigned to wait for his trial.

He looked up in surprise when a key grated in his door. He got up eagerly when the door opened and a gruff voice said, "C'mon out, Lasher."

He grabbed up his battered black Stetson and rammed it down on his black hair and strode lithely out, afraid to ask any questions.

"Right down the hall," the turnkey told him cheerfully.

Two men were in the office at the end of the hall. One was the uniformed jailer and the other was a tall, stooped man with a mild face and the look of a confirmed alcoholic.

The uniformed man said, "You're going out on bail, Lasher. Mr. O'Con-

nor here has put up the cash for you. Here's your gun." He laid a wide, leather gun belt with a swiveled, cut-off holster on the scarred pine counter in front of him. "We don't like your kind of shooting in Denver," he went on heavily. "Next time bail will be doubled."

Lasher was tall and slim-hipped, with dark, aquiline features and a look of lean hardness about him. He studied Timothy O'Connor curiously for a moment, taking in the man's seedy attire and his run-down appearance, then he shrugged and picked up his gun belt. He said, "I'm much obliged tuh you, stranger."

Timothy O'Connor smiled thinly. He waited until they were outside in the Denver night before explaining. "It wa'n't my hundred dollars that got you loose. I just planked it down for the Jedge."

"The Judge?" Gut-Luck stopped and stared at him. "How come the judge put up bail fer me? Yuh mean the one what was gonna try me in court?"

"Naw. Not him." Timothy laughed scornfully. "Jedge Prink."

Gut-Luck said, "I don't reckon I know the gen'leman."

Timothy looked at him incredulously. "You don't know Jedge J. Worthington Prink?"

"Never heard tell of him."

"Well, you *are* new in Denver. But you're gonna get to meet him right away. He wants you to come to his soot in the Cambridge Hotel."

"Where's that at?"

Timothy O'Connor gave the newly released gut-shooter directions for finding the hotel. "I'd show you but I got business to 'tend to," he ended importantly. "I'm on my way down to the Square Deal Casino to see a man right now."

Gut-Luck promised to visit the judge in his suite at the Cambridge Hotel forthwith, and they parted.

THE Square Deal Casino occupied the ground floor of a rooming house on Arapahoe Street just off 17th. It was a quiet gambling establishment known throughout the Rocky Mountain region as a place where a man could get a play for any kind of money he wished to lay on the line, and much patronized by mining men in the city for a brief fling.

The Square Deal was unique in those days in that none of the various games were directly financed by the house. Instead, each of the games was leased to a professional gambler who paid the house a percentage of his winnings for the privilege of operating there.

For almost a year now, Windy Rivers had run a stud poker game in the rear corner of the big front poker room. He was a slim middle-aged man, always elegantly dressed, with finely chiseled features and cold contemptuous eyes. His slender fingers were soft and white as a woman's, and he could stack a deck of cards or deal seconds with an insolent competence that made him one of the most successful gamblers in the city.

That had always been Windy's trouble; he was too successful. He seldom lost, and never very much. All through his career he had been cursed with this habit of never losing; he simply couldn't. His professional pride rebelled at dealing himself losing hands for sucker bait.

A year was longer than Windy generally lasted in one place, and he'd stayed in Denver that long only because there were always newcomers drifting into the Square Deal who hadn't heard of Windy. At that, pickings had been getting increasingly slim during the past few months, and Windy knew he'd about played his string out.

On this Sunday night, for instance, Windy Rivers was negligently dealing stud to only two players, while the other games around the room were getting a heavy-money play. And his two suckers were of a type becoming all too common at his table. One was a young cowpuncher of seventeen who had come to town with a trainload of steers and had a month's salary to squander before his return to the range; and the other

was a grizzled prospector in from Central City with a small bag of dust he had laboriously panned from the waters of Clear Creek.

Together, they had less than fifty dollars in front of them on the poker table, and they were playing so cautiously that Windy knew he would have to waste the entire evening getting even that small amount from them.

He negligently dealt each of them an ace in the hole and gave himself a deuce, then paired up one ace and gave the other the king of the same suit as his hole card. He dealt himself a four-spot up, and yawned as the pair of aces daringly plunged with a three-dollar bet.

He was suddenly conscious of someone standing beside his chair, and glanced up hopefully, thinking it might be fresh money coming into the game.

But it was only Timothy O'Connor.

Windy nodded and dealt three more cards around, giving himself a five so he could make a straight out of his hand if it seemed advisable.

Timothy asked, "Are you pretty busy tonight, Windy?"

Windy grunted and jerked his head toward the table in an invitation for Timothy to see for himself. The ace-king-queen royal flush was hesitating over calling the five-dollar bet made by the pair of aces.

"Jedge Prink is back in town," Timothy confided to the gambler.

Windy said, "So?"

"Jest came in today. You know he's been gone two-three months."

Windy shook his head to indicate he didn't know. His face remained placidly expressionless though he inwardly groaned when the young cowpoke reluctantly turned his cards down. The fool should have waited for the joker which would have been his next card and given him a betting hand.

"Yep," Timothy said. "An' he's got a deal in the makin', I shouldn't wonder. Wants to see you about midnight in his soot at the Cambridge."

Windy said, "Does he?" He doubled the five-dollar bet of the prospector.

"That's right. It's mighty important, I guess. I know he's ordered a set-up of champagne an' everything in his soot from the bar."

Windy Rivers nodded. He said, "Midnight," and dealt the old prospector a second, the joker, giving him three aces, and dropping a trey onto his hand from the bottom of the deck.

Knowing Windy's peculiar aversion to using two words when one would do the job, Timothy accepted the two syllables as agreement and waited only to see the prospector put the rest of his money on his three aces and lose it all to Windy's six-high straight before going out.

CHAPTER II

AT MIDNIGHT there was gathered in suite 1-A of the Cambridge Hotel as fine a collection of rogues as could be brought together in the teeming city of Denver.

A fat man dominated the assemblage. He had a shining pink scalp utterly devoid of hair, and his puffy cheeks had a pink, scrubbed look that gave him a disarmingly childlike expression. His lips were full and soft and moist, and in repose they settled themselves into a happy sort of pout. He had no discernible chin; there were merely successive billows of fat bulging out above a celluloid collar and black string tie.

He looked completely genial and almost pathetically helpless as he sat there with his huge body overflowing from an overstuffed armchair—until one caught a glimpse of his eyes; they were black and cold and utterly ruthless. His voice was a soft, throaty purr.

He sat in the center of the large living room, with a wheeled service table conveniently close to his right hand. There were two silver buckets containing bottles of iced champagne on the table, a quart bottle of whis-

key, a pitcher of cracked ice and a silver soda siphon.

Seated around the room in varying attitudes of tenseness and expectancy were Windy Rivers, the gambler; Daniel Deever, from the Park Hill Baptist Church; Gut-Luck Lasher, late of the city jail; Miss Connie Dawson, the Larimer Street songstress; and a fifth man whose name was Gilbert Crane.

Crane was a well-preserved forty, a broad-shouldered athletic type, with a bluff, open countenance. His face was sun-browned and seamed a little with laugh crinkles at the corners of his blue eyes; he had a hearty way of throwing back his head and laughing which exposed a mouthful of strong white teeth. He had a way of gaining the instant friendship and respect of other men, and of causing heart tremors in any unattached female whom he honored with his attention. Gilbert Crane was one of the most unscrupulous horse traders in the West.

When all his guests were gathered, and all had drinks to their liking, Judge J. Worthington Prink cleared his throat and began to explain the reason for the conclave in a benign, almost fatherly voice.

"All of you know me, and all of you know each other—except you, Mr. Lasher. I'll take the liberty of explaining you to the others if I may, sir.

"Mr. Gut-Luck Lasher is the gentleman who disposed of Lefty Breen a short time ago," Judge Prink confided to the others. "He derives his nickname, I understand, from his unorthodox and exceedingly effective method of handling the weapon now belted about his waist. Knowing the reputation of Lefty Breen as we all do, I think none of us will question Mr. Gut-Luck's proficiency."

"A MAN of violence." Daniel Deever took a swig of straight whiskey and shuddered. "With the blood of innocent victims staining his hands. *'For vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, and I'—"*

"You," said Judge Prink silkily, "will keep your scriptural quotations to yourself, Daniel." He paused and took an appreciative sip of champagne from a thin, slender-columned glass beside him.

"What's this all about?" Connie Dawson demanded impatiently. "You're not feeding us champagne and bonded whiskey just for the pleasure of our company. You've helped us all out of messes in the past—we'll grant that. But I'm clean right now; I'm working perfectly legal."

"And I," said Daniel Deever heavily, "have lately risen to a position of high respect and responsibility of Christian fellowship in the congregaton of the Park Hill Baptist Church. I assure you I have turned over a new leaf and through prayer and abnegation have found the pathway to eternal salvation."

"I don't know what you want of me either," Gilbert Crane put in. "I haven't pulled a crooked deal for months—any sort of a deal for that matter," he ended with a self-conscious chuckle.

"Same here," said Windy Rivers tersely.

"Exactly. But I need your help this time." Judge Prink took another sip of champagne. "You all know I've been away from the city for several months."

"Sure. While the grand jury was investigating that bribed jury stink," Crane put in. "We all know you ducked out on account of that."

Judge Prink nodded benignly. "It seemed advisable," he purred. "And I've been sojourning in Powder Valley." His moist lips caressed the two words. "In the little village of Dutch Springs, far from the bustle of the city. A small community of ignorant ranchers—and of unparalleled wealth.

"Wait," he went on strongly, holding up a fat, dimpled hand. "The residents of Powder Valley are not only ignorant, they are as trusting as children. In the innocence of their hearts they received a stranger with open arms, and were pleased and de-

lighted when I settled in the county seat at Dutch Springs and opened the first attorney's office in that vicinity. I took this step after discovering that a district judge was to be appointed from that district, and last week I was honored and repaid by receiving that appointment."

They were all listening with rapt attention now, and the newly appointed judge from Powder Valley went on softly:

"I immediately thought of my friends here in the city: You, Connie, singing your heart out every night in the Black Angel for a few paltry dollars each week. And you, Daniel, sacrilegiously dipping your sticky fingers into the Baptist collection plates each Sunday night for a take that certainly cannot satisfy a man of your expensive tastes."

"It was a little over a hundred tonight," Deever told him in a nettled tone. "In the Good Book is the clear promise—the Lord will provide."

"Pin money," said Judge Prink contemptuously. "And you, Gilbert Crane, without the capital to finance another trading expedition, you're rotting away here in Denver. And Windy—we all know that Windy has dealt himself such a towering reputation here that none but the most incautious will risk their money at his table. And as for Mr. Gut-Luck, it is clearly evident that he has not learned to make hisgun skill pay dividends. Now, I propose to change all that. I have a proposition for each and every one of you. A tremendous proposition." His voice was warm with satisfied contentment. He glanced around at the empty glasses and made a motion toward the table beside him. "I suggest that refills are in order."

DEEVER and Crane were quick to act on his suggestion. Windy Rivers pursed his lips and shook his head. Young Lasher got to his feet lithely and hesitated, then went toward Connie and asked awkwardly, "Could I get you some more of that there bubble-juice, Ma'am?"

Connie said, "Please," with a smile of approval on her rouged lips. She was older than he, but her flesh was firm and in the soft light she looked young and almost beautiful. Her eyes followed him with a careful, calculating look as he went across to refill her glass, and she made room for him on the small settee beside her when he returned, throwing her head back to tighten the sagging flesh of her neck and veiling her eyes with long lashes.

"Powder Valley," Judge J. Worthington Prink told them happily, "is waiting to be taken. It lies there, secluded and rich, smugly self-satisfied. A small domain set apart from the rest of our glorious state. As district judge, I have my finger on the pulse of the community. I am not without influence there, and I have not been idle since I realized the tremendous potentialities which I stumbled on quite by accident. There is a place for each one of you in my plan; a definite need for the peculiar abilities of each one of you—with commensurate rewards.

"Listen to this, Daniel." He leveled a fat forefinger at the bald, sideburned man. "There is a widow in Powder Valley. Her name is Mrs. Myra Jenkins and she holds clear title to a forty-section ranch now stocked with close to five hundred head of cattle. She is not uncomely and has endured widowhood for a matter of two years. She is deeply religious and very active in Dutch Springs' only church. Yet she is not satisfied with orthodox religious activities and has lately taken up with dabbling in spiritualism by way of mail-order books. With a little encouragement, a few messages from the Beyond—" He puased significantly.

Daniel Deever flicked out his tongue to wet his tight lips. He murmured, "Forty sections and five hundred head of cattle."

"Exactly," purred the judge. "Like a ripe plum waiting to fall into the proper hands. And listen to this, Windy. In Dutch Springs there is only one hotel. The Jewel. And it

is a jewel indeed. Complete with bar and gaming room, it is coining money for its proprietor—a man by the name of Thomas Dasher who considers himself an adept in the art of playing stud poker. His sole complaint is that the Valley is devoid of men with sporting instincts and sufficient cash to give him any real competition—and he does not hesitate to boast that no stakes are too high for him in a game of stud poker. Consider that situation, Windy, while I tell Miss Connie Dawson about the cashier in the local bank.

"He is in his mid-thirties, Connie. A bachelor from the East. He owns a large portion of the bank stock and is in sole control of the institution. He is out of place in Dutch Springs, just as you will be out of place among those ignorant and uncultured ranchers. He, too, is ripe for the plucking, and he could be squeezed for fifty thousand or I miss my estimate."

THE judge paused and pursed his lips with a little sigh. He emptied his champagne glass and touched his mouth lightly with a silk handkerchief.

"In all of Powder Valley," he confided, "there is one man who stands head and shoulders above the rest and he, unfortunately, is the sheriff. His name is Pat Stevens and he is no man's fool." The judge's purring voice became brittle and his beady eyes gleamed with malevolence.

"Mr. Stevens knows too much for his own health. Unlike his neighbors, he was not born and reared in the Valley. He has a suspicious nature and is without personal fear. His guns have a reputation of their own and he has a fanatical love for Powder Valley. The sheriff had the effrontery to oppose my appointment as district judge on the grounds that my reputation and background should be investigated more fully, and he is the type to look with suspicion upon any newcomers who drift into the Valley.

"That's where you come in, sir," he went on swiftly to Gut-Luck. "You and Mr. Crane. Sheriff Pat Stevens must be eliminated—leaving his attractive wife as sole owner of one of the finest and richest ranches in the Valley.

"Mrs. Sally Stevens will be your job, Gilbert, after her husband is out of the way. You'll find her to your liking, I think, and you're the type she will easily turn to in sorrow. I've already made arrangements for you to take possession of a small horse ranch bordering on the Lazy Mare spread. You'll move in immediately and make friends with the Stevens family. There's a young son whose confidence you should immediately gain. Through him, you should find a way to the mother's heart after her bereavement. And it strikes me you would make a wonderful sheriff, Gilbert. I feel there would be little difficulty obtaining Pat Stevens' star if you were lucky enough to kill his murderer after Stevens is shot down—in the guts, shall we say?" he added with a sidelong glance at Gut-Luck. "And I think that can be arranged."

"Wait a minute." Gut-Luck straightened up on the settee. "What's that yo're plannin'? You want I should go up agin' this here fast-shootin' sheriff an' then fix it for *him* to get me after I've done the job?"—with an outraged nod toward Gilbert Crane.

Judge J. Worthington Prink chuckled happily and his big belly jiggled up and down and sideways. "Not at all, my dear sir. I believe we can arrange things in a more satisfactory manner. We'll use a decoy, don't you see? An innocent bystander who can be charged with your crime and who won't be able to deny it after Mr. Crane has exacted vengeance upon him for your act. Please trust me to handle these details.

"I've thought of Old Timothy O'Connor as the man," he went on to Crane thoughtfully. "Promise him a skinful of whiskey and Timothy will jump at the chance to accompany you to the horse ranch. Arrange a public argument between Timothy and Pat Stevens, with threats on Timothy's

part. The rest should be easy. The whole affair can take place on your horse ranch with only you and Mr. Lasher as witnesses. Then Gut-Luck fades into the background while you emerge as the intrepid defender of law and order. Mrs. Stevens should be properly impressed and thankful —and even if you shouldn't suceed in taking her husband's place in her affections you will have done your part by eliminating a sheriff who might otherwise cause trouble to our plans."

THE judge paused to wet his mouth with a sip of champagne again. An incredulous and horrified silence held the little group in the room as they individually assimilated the judge's astounding and cold-blooded proposals toward the various inhabitants of Powder Valley whom he had named.

Daniel Deever broke the silence with a loud snort of mingled doubt and fear. "You've worked out a pretty plan," he burst out. "But it will take months or years to accomplish it."

"A year," said the judge, "is not too long a time for the sort of money involved. And I have prepared all my plans on that basis. It is something that cannot be rushed. We must do our work quietly and circumspectly so that no breath of suspicion attaches to any single one of us."

"I don't get it," said Connie petulantly. "This bank cashier from the east—what makes you think he'll fall for a dance-hall girl like me? And how'll Daniel work into the confidence of that widow lady?"

"I've thought everything out, made all arrangements," the judge assured her. "You, for instance, will not be a dance-hall warbler in Dutch Springs. No indeed. You, my dear Connie, will acquire a new wardrobe and all the outer appearances of respectability. For I think Mr. Rudd Fleming may look with interest on the new schoolteacher. And after he first looks with interest, you'll be expected to do the rest, Connie."

"Schoolteacher?" Connie Dawson laughed shrilly. "Good Lord, judge. Do you expect me to teach the ranchers' brats how to mix a Mickey Finn?"

"Not at all." The judge's gravity was undisturbed. "I happen to know your background, my dear. Your education is sufficient to teach the three r's. And Dutch Springs needs a teacher. Indeed, when it became known I was leaving for Denver on a business trip I was requested to look for a teacher here and offer her the position.

"And I think it will be well for you to accompany Miss Dawson as her uncle, Daniel," he went on to Deever. "Let us say you are a retired minister whose ill health has sent you West. That will provide a perfectly plausible reason for your presence in Dutch Springs, and your interest in church activities will put you in immediate contact with the Widow Jenkins.

"As for you, Windy, no circumlocution will be required. You'll drift into the village merely as a professional gambler and will settle at the Jewel Hotel to give Mr. Dasher his chance to play stud poker for any stakes he wishes."

Windy shrugged and muttered, "My bankroll doesn't stack up to a big game."

"You don't understand. None of you seem to understand." The judge looked pained. "I've planned this as a co-operative effort. I've planned the lay and I've laid the groundwork for each of you. I am prepared to finance each of you in your efforts for one year. I lift you out of the gutter here in Denver and set you down in Powder Valley with a ready-made proposition. One or two of you may fail. No matter. If one or two are successful we'll all be repaid for our year's work. It'll all go in the central pot, don't you see? Whatever each of you can take out of the Valley. And a fair division at the end. Half to me and the other half split five ways." He lifted his champagne glass and beamed around on them all. "How does it strike you?"

HIS five listeners all wore strained or bemused expressions as they listened to the astounding proposal that was being made to them. It was utterly preposterous and unreal, yet the judge's soft assured voice made it seem quite plausible. What he proposed was the cunning and ruthless and wholesale rape of an entire community of people whom they did not know and who had done none of them harm. His plan would loose calculated murder in Powder Valley; would send five agents of destruction into the unsuspecting community to worm their ways into the confidence of its people and wrest from them what was rightfully theirs.

"I want you to note the simplicity of my proposition," the judge told them quietly. "Each of you will work alone—except for Gilbert and Mr. Gut-Luck, of course—yet all will be working as a unit. All of you can't fail. Where any of you might hesitate because of the odds against you, not one of you can afford to stay out of this because the eventual split will be well worth while. I like to think of it as one of the greatest coups ever attempted," he went on happily. "Broad in scope and magnificent in conception. Never before, I think, has such a co-operative effort been attempted. All for one and one for all." He splashed champagne in his glass. "Shall we drink to Powder Valley—to the division of spoils one year from today?"

He waddled up to his feet and lifted his glass.

Slowly, the others rose also. Each of them slowly touched a glass to his lips as though hypnotized by a spell cast over the room by the fat man's purring voice. It was like the kiss of death to Powder Valley.

CHAPTER III

AFTER the long cool evening of early autumn, night darkness fell gently upon the Lazy Mare ranch in Powder Valley. It was the time of year and the time of day that Pat Stevens liked best of all. There was a sting in the coolness of the night air presaging the bleak winter to come, yet it was tempered by a sensuous warmth given off by the earth itself.

Pat had a habit of stepping outside the ranch house at the end of a long evening like this, to watch the night come on. He pretended to himself and Sally that it was for the purpose of testing the weather, predicting how much longer it would be before snow would fly, to plan the fall round-up so that the sleek herds would be moved safely down into the haven of the valley before a blizzard trapped them in their high summer pasturage; but actually he did it for the sheer pleasure of watching the stars come out one by one as night closed down on the valley.

Tonight Sally finished the supper dishes early and came out to stand beside him. There hadn't been many dishes because their son, Dock, had ridden into Dutch Springs with one-eyed Ezra that afternoon and the pair hadn't returned.

Sally came up lightly beside her husband and rested her hand on his shoulder. He put his arm about her slender waist and drew her closer to him, his gaze fixed steadily outward into the gathering darkness. He said, "We've got three weeks more, maybe."

"To get the stock down?" Sally Stevens nodded her bright blonde head. "With Ezra and Dock to help it won't be any job at all."

"That's right." Pat's voice was strong with pride. "Dock's turnin' into a mighty good cow-hand." He chuckled happily. "Sure does take to Ol' Ezra too."

"He's picking up some awful language from Ezra," Sally sighed. "I do wish a new teacher would come and get school started. Dock'll forget all he's learned if he keeps on tagging around after Ezra."

"I wouldn't worry 'bout that, Sally. He'll learn plenty from Ezra that ain't in any schoolbooks."

"It has been good for both of them, I guess. I don't believe Ezra would ever have been satisfied to stay here after you got back from that Texas trip if it hadn't been for Dock."

"It's kinda hard on Ezra," Pat Stevens reminded her gently. "With Sam an' me both married now an' with places of our own."

"I know. I do hope he's able to lease the K Bar ranch. It'll be nice having him for our neighbor, and Ezra is a wonderful hand for raising horses."

"He's seein' Judge Prink about the ranch today. I reckon he'll get the lease all right, Sally. I sent a letter along with him saying I'd go on his note for any cash he needed to swing the deal."

"I'm glad you did that, Pat." Sally's hand tightened on her husband's shoulder. "I hoped you'd help him."

"Yo're the dangedest woman." Pat's voice was wondering, almost awed. "Ain't many wives would want their husbands to go on a note for an old no-good like Ezra."

"You know I always want you to do *anything* for either Sam or Ezra."

"I know it, Sally, but I can't get over being surprised every time you say it again."

"They're like—like parts of you," she told him softly. "What we are and what we have here. . .the ranch and our place in the Valley. Our marriage and Dock. . .none of them would have *been* without Sam and Ezra."

PAT STEVENS pulled a deep breath of the clean night air into his lungs. Sally was right, of course. There wasn't any way to measure what he and Sally owed to his two gun partners.

Memories came crowding over him as he and Sally stood there together. They had been a trio to reckon with in those older days when Judge Colt was the only law on that untamed frontier. Huge Ezra with his scarred face and his single eye gleaming happily when the going was the toughest, with his mop of crimson hair and huge body that held the strength of three ordinary men. And Sam Sloan! Small, dark and wiry, with loose-holstered guns and a way of driving on into danger with a grim ferocity that made lesser men quail and back away. And Pat Stevens himself. Leader of the trio. More cautious and faster thinking than his two companions and packing the fastest pair of guns in Colorado.

Yep. They'd seen a lot of things together. But that was all in the past now. Pat had been married for twelve years and was proprietor of one of the finest ranches in the Valley besides having had the job of sheriff forced on him a couple of years ago. And Sam was settled down, too; married to pretty Kitty Lane and riding the Pony Express route into Dutch Springs. He had put his guns away and was more scared of forthcoming fatherhood than he'd ever been of leaden death.

Only Ezra remained untamed. After Sam's marriage he had tried to settle down with Sam and his wife as keeper of the Express station outside of Dutch Springs, but the inactivity had soon palled on the big one-eyed man. Lately he had been induced to move into a spare room at the Lazy Mare ranch, but both Pat and Sally had realized he wasn't really happy helping with the ranch work and sort of keeping an eye on Dock. That's why Pat had been glad when the small K Bar spread on the south of the Lazy Mare had been vacated by Sy Tarnish's death a few months previously, and he had been encouraging Ezra to take a lease on it as soon as the estate was settled.

With these thoughts in his mind, Pat Stevens bent his head slightly to press his hard, bronzed cheek against Sally's bright hair. "You're right, honey. Powder Valley wouldn't be what it is today without Sam an' Ezra."

"It's a wonderful place for a boy to grow up in," she whispered softly. "Dock is lucky that he doesn't have to know any of the bloodshed and horror that we've known."

Pat lifted his face from her hair and gazed out through the darkness toward the south. "Riders comin'," he reported. "Two of 'em at a lope."

SALLY had learned not to question Pat at a time like this when he heard or sensed things hidden

from her. She took it for granted that he was right, and she said, "That'll be Dock and Ezra back from town. I'd better go in and warm things up for them." But she didn't move away from Pat's arm, and he didn't relax it from about her waist.

Soon even she could hear the clop-clop of ridden horses through the night silence. They came loping up the slope and swerved in toward the pair, pulling up in front of them.

"Hey there Mom. . .and Dad," Dock's young voice called happily as he flund himself out of the saddle. "Betcha didn't wait supper for us, an' me, I'm plumb starved. I'm so doggoned hongry," he went on, "that I betcha my stomach thinks my throat's done been split."

"Dock!" Sally reproved him in a shocked tone. "You're picking up a lot of mighty rough slang these days. I don't like it."

"I do," he told her unabashed. "I've been gettin' Ezra to teach me to talk like he does."

"I'm right sorry, ma'am." Ezra swung his huge body lightly out of the saddle. "I been tellin' Dock you wouldn't take kindly to him patternin' after me."

"He needs a good britches-quirting," Pat said with a chuckle. "Take both hawses down to the barn, son, and put them up."

"You bet. I'll shore do that." Dock caught up the reins and led the two saddled horses away before Ezra could protest or his mother could correct him again.

Sally laughed ruefully and said, "Shore! Did you hear him, Pat? Whatever are we going to do with him if school doesn't start soon?"

"It'll be startin' right soon now," Ezra comforted her as the three of them moved toward the ranch house. "Jedge Prink tole me today that he had a teacher a-comin' from Denver purty quick. Next week, I reckon."

"So you saw the judge?" Pat stopped on the pathway. "How about the ranch, Ezra?"

The big man shook his red head dolefully. "Nothin' doin'," he reported. It was too dark to see the expression on his scarred face, but Pat could plainly hear the deep disappointment in his voice.

"Why not?" Pat asked angrily. "Isn't the estate settled yet?"

"Yep. That's the trouble. It's done settled an' the ranch has been sold again."

"But you told him you wanted it," Pat said hotly. "He knew you were just waiting to make an offer."

"I tole the jedge that, but he said I hadn't put no money down—no option money, he called it—so I didn't have no legal claim. He used some mighty big words in the tellin', an' made it sound all right."

"Perhaps the new owner will be willing to lease it to you," Sally suggested.

"NOPE. I reckon not. I stopped by the K Bar on my way home an' ast him. He's done moved in, bag an' baggage. Purty nice feller too. Name of Crane. An' he knows hawses. He figgers on runin' the place his ownself. Even ast him fer a job," Ezra went on haltingly, "but he don't want no han's neither. Brought two with him. One of 'em looks whiskey-sick an' t'other looks too mighty much gun handy fer a plain wrangler, but Mr. Crane reckons they'll be all the help he'll need. Right off, anyhow."

"That's a damned shame," said Pat hotely. "I don't trust Judge Prink. Haven't from the first. He knew you had your eye on that ranch. He should have notified you as soon as the heirs were ready to do business."

"I dunno." Ezra sounded as though he'd lost the ability to feel anger. "I got a sorta hunch that this Crane feller is mebby a friend of Jedge Prink's. Yuh cain't blame him fer he'pin' out his friends."

"The hell you can't," said Pat hotly. "That's exactly what a judge has no right to do."

"Please, Pat. Don't get upset about it." Sally tugged at her husband's coat sleeve. "There'll be another chance for Ezra to get back on a ranch of his own."

"But not on a place like the K Bar," grated Pat. "Right next to us, an' all set up for hawse raisin'. I

tell you, Sally, I got a feelin' we're riding for trouble with Judge Prink in the saddle. It's invitin' trouble when we let an outsider come in an' take a responsible job like that in the Valley."

"We didn't have any local man qualified,' she reminded him. "He's the first real lawyer that ever settled down in Dutch Springs. You know that, Pat."

"I still don't like it," he growled. "I distrust a man as fat as that. An' now we've got a friend of his saddled on us for a neighbor."

"I didn't go to say that. I don't rightly know he's a friend of the jedge's. Mighty nice feller anyhow. An' he shore cottoned up to Dock. They got to be right good friends jest while I was stopped by there talkin' to him."

"See, Pat? You mustn't hold it against Mr. Crane that he took the opportunity to buy a good ranch while he could get it."

"That's right," Ezra said wistfully. "Me, I reckon mebby I'm gettin' too old to run a ranch nohow. Mebby I'd best go back to the Express station an' settle down to feedin' hawses the rest of my life."

"Don't do that, Ezra. Stay around here for awhile. Till after the fall round-up anyhow. We'll see if we can't work something else out."

"Mercy," said Sally. "There's Dock coming back from the barn and I haven't got supper warmed. Are you two coming in?"

Pat said, "We might as well." He and Ezra slowly followed her up the path.

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS early dawn on Sunday morning. A mockingbird came from somewhere and settled on a high leafless branch of the gnarled cottonwood growing on the east side of the weatherbeaten ranch house. The tiny bird fluffed its wings and seemed to shiver in the cold from which its fellows had fled southward, then it lifted its head and swelled its throat with glorious song.

Inside the sparse bedroom Mrs. Jenkins awoke instantly. She threw back the covers and sat up in bed, reaching out for a man's shabby gray bathrobe on a chair beside her. Her thin, tired features were lighted with a queer sort of exultation. She slid out of bed and stood up on bare feet, wrapping the robe tightly about her scrawny body. She padded across the room to the open window, and slowly lifted her arms and clasped work-roughened hands high above her head.

She stood like that for a long moment while the lone mockingbird poured out its morning rhapsody, then she slowly lifted herself on her toes and drew in a deep breath simultaneously. She held herself taut like that, her eyes wide open and staring, thin bloodless lips parted a trifle, a strained look of intense concentration tightening her face.

Then she relaxed down onto her bare heels, letting out her breath audibly while she nodded and smiled at the mockingbird. She repeated this again and again, an even dozen times, as had been recommended in the pamphlet entitled *Get Your Body in Tune with the Infinite* which she had received through the mail a few days previously.

The rim of the sun climbed above the flat horizon as she finished, and as though in response to a soundless signal from the infinite, the mockingbird ceased its song at that exact instant.

It fluttered its wings and flew away. Mrs. Myra Jenkins watched its winged flight through the still morning air with awed eyes. The pamphlet had promised that the unseen forces evoked by this morning ritual would give her some sign to know that the tuning in was going along satisfactorily, and she was sure that the mockingbird had been sent for just that purpose.

He had appeared outside her window the very first morning that she began the prescribed ritual, and for three mornings now he had fluttered his wings and flown away just as she finished the twelfth exhalation. She knew, now, that it was no ordinary mockingbird. All the rest of his

feathered tribe had left a month earlier for warmer weather, and he had appeared from nowhere that first morning to waken her in time to get in her deep breathing before the morning sun became visible. Certainly, she thought, no one could ask for a clearer sign than that.

She left the window open and went back into the chill bedroom to toss off the bathrobe and dress swiftly. Mrs. Myra Jenkins was forty-five years old and she had been widowed two years. The loss of her husband had not been a numbing shock to her. She had grown used to Tod Jenkins through the years, but they had never been close to one another.

She hurried to her mirror to let down the tight curls of her iron-gray hair and comb it out in a soft fluffy mass while she experimented with some more deep breathing exercises.

THERE were a dozen or more surreys and buggies lined up in front of the ugly little frame church building in Dutch Springs when Mrs. Jenkins drove up in her buggy. The wheezing notes of an old organ came out to her as she tied her team at the hitchrack, and she hurried because she hated to miss any of the hymn singing.

The church was twenty feet wide and forty feet long, with a raised platform at the front with a wooden stand for the minister's Bible. There were rows of straight chairs out in front, not more than a quarter occupied, for a great majority of the citizens of Powder Valley felt they were serving the Lord better by staying home and tending to the chores instead of driving in to hear a sermon.

The minister was a tall, thin, spectacled young man who clerked in Mr. Winters' general store on weekdays. It was whispered that he had tuberculosis and had given up a parish in Kansas City to come west for his health.

The minister was standing up on the platform beating out the time for an old hymn when Mrs. Jenkins hurried in. The couple of dozen worshipers were standing and singing loudly and unevenly. Mrs. Jenkins stopped at the first row of chairs that had occupants before she realized the two standing persons were complete strangers to her, and evidently city folks at that.

One of them was a tall severe-looking gentleman with long black sideburns and a bald head. He held a hymn book and his singing voice was loud and sonorous, with a sort of mournful sound which struck Mrs. Jenkins as being very appropriate for hymn singing.

The girl on his right looked like she might be his daughter, though she was mighty pretty for that. She was dressed outlandishly fashionable for church, but she had a sweet face and a beautiful, true voice that carried out and above all the others.

Daniel Deever glanced sideways at Mrs. Jenkins as she bustled up beside him. He saw a thin, leathery face beneath a rusty old black hat, and a black silk dress that came down to the tops of high buttoned shoes. He moved the hymn book questioningly and gallantly toward her, and she simpered at him and took hold of it with claw-like fingers. Her voice was thin and reedy, but not too loud, and he winced only a little when it sounded close to his left ear.

The congregation sang two more hymns, and then bowed their heads while the earnest young minister besought the Lord to guide them into closer communion with Him, and then they seated themselves and listened to his sermon.

WHILE he waited for the tiresome sermon to be over, Daniel Deever amused himself by studying the female members of the congregation seated in front of him and seeking to determine which one of them might possibly be the widow with abnormal religious cravings and clear title to a large ranch.

Being able to view only the backs of their heads, Deever really didn't have much to go on, but he studied them one by one, recalling what he could of the judge's sketchy description, and allowing himself to become

optimistic as he picked out two ladies sitting alone who didn't look too offensive from the rear.

He and Connie had arrived by stage yesterday, and Daniel Deever's first impression of Dutch Springs was that the widow Jenkins would have to be fairly good-looking and mighty wealthy to make up to him for the prospect of spending much time in Powder Valley.

Connie Dawson, on the other hand, professed herself delighted with Dutch Springs. Deever didn't know whether Connie really meant it, or whether she was just pretending in order to irritate him. Posing as uncle and niece, they had gone to the Jewel Hotel and taken rooms there, and this visit to the village church was really their first opportunity to become acquainted with the men and women with whom they were to live during the coming months.

But already, ever since she had left Denver, Connie had seemed different. The new wardrobe had much to do with the change. She had discarded all the frayed finery she had worn in the city, and had selected new and simple things to wear in Dutch Springs while she masqueraded as a schoolteacher. They made her look younger and fresher, somehow, and the absence of cosmetics, curiously enough, also contributed to the same effect.

She sat beside Daniel now with simple dignity while the younger minister went on about the iniquity of sins of the flesh, and her eyes sparkled and her lips were parted as though she eagerly drank in every word he said.

On the other hand, it was quite an ordeal for Daniel. He'd sat through lots of sermons in his day, but had never learned to enjoy them. He didn't mind preaching one himself, for he enjoyed the sound of his own voice and the feeling of importance and power that came with standing before a congregation while they were forced to sit and listen to him, but he had never enjoyed being a listener.

He wondered, now, when they were going to take up the collection, who took it up, and whether it would be worth fooling with on following Sundays. He hardly thought so, as he counted the small congregation.

He was glad when the sermon was over and they stood up to sing the final hymn. He again courteously shared his hymnal with the stringy, faded woman at his left, and steeled himself against the penetrating sound of her voice in his ear.

WHEN the hymn was ended the minister dismissed them with a brief prayer and without, to Deever's intense astonishment, the passing of a collection plate at all. He could scarcely believe the service was indeed over, until people began milling around, greeting each other and asking grave questions about the condition of the range and the weight of yearling calves.

Connie nudged him as he stood there, and whispered, "Let's get going before we're surrounded," and he moved out into the aisle and waited for her to take his arm, and then strode up the aisle toward the rear door with the slight limp that distinguished his gait.

The Reverend Lowpeck was before them, however. After the final prayer he had sprinted up a side aisle and now stood in the doorway to greet each of his flock with a soft handshake and a murmured greeting.

Daniel Deever and Connie were the first to reach him, and he spoke effusively to the strangers, blinking his eyes rapidly at Connie behind thick lenses and trying to pretend he was unaware of her worldly beauty.

"You're Mr. Deever, I believe, sir. Judge Prink—ah—spoke of your coming. Let me welcome you, sir. Let me make you *most welcome*. You're—ah—a fellow-worker in the vineyard, are you not? I understood from Judge Prink that you—ah—"

"Quite correct," Deever told him heartily. "In my humble way I seek to follow in the footsteps of our Lord. It has been my good fortune in the past to guide a goodly number of erring souls into the pathway of righteousness. And allow me to con-

gratulate you on your sermon this morning, sir. A wonderful effort on a theme too often neglected. Uh—have you met my niece, Brother?"

"I'm delighted. Charmed. I'm—ah—"

"Miss Connie Dawson," Deever told him. "In her own way a spiritual influence too. She's come to instruct the younger ones, you understand."

"The new schoolteacher. Of course. I know. Everyone's expected—that is—ah—we've all wondered.—Why *Mrs.* Jenkins. How-do-you-do this morning?"

Daniel Deever turned his head slowly. He flinched and closed his eyes when he heard a reedy voice close behind him saying:

"I manage to stay mighty spry, Reverend Lowpeck. Yessir, mighty spry. And I'll tell you what does it though you'll never believe me. On my soul you won't. You'll scoff, like as not. But it's a mockingbird that does it. And *breathing*. The rule of twelve."

Daniel Deever opened his eyes slowly. He set his teeth and turned to look at Mrs. Myra Jenkins, to see if he could find any redeeming feature he hadn't noticed while she stood beside him during service. He couldn't. She was as leathery and as stringy as he had first noted. But he had a strong constitution and an iron will. He intoned sepulchrally, "*In Tune with the Infinite.*"

The widow Jenkins caught in her breath sharply, sucking in her lower lip and indenting it with small upper teeth. "Are you—a believer?" she whispered.

Daniel Deever bowed his head. Inwardly he said, "Lord, help me," but outwardly he proclaimed, "I am a seeker after the Truth, madam, in all its various manifestations. I have groped through canonical bypaths, searching behind the veil of orthodoxy into the realm of theological investigation on the higher astral planes."

"Yes indeed," said the Reverend Lowpeck confusedly. "Most interesting. May I present Mr. Deever of Denver, Mrs. Jenkins. He and his charming niece are—ah—have come—"

"To dwell among you for a time," Daniel helped him out. "And it is a good portent, Mrs. Jenkins, to hear the sacred Rule of Twelve mentioned not in jest. But the mockingbird? I confess I am not familiar with that aspect of the Rule."

They moved aside together to make way for other members of the congregation on their way out. Connie Dawson stepped alone over the threshold into the thin clear sunlight. She hadn't met Mr. Rudd Fleming yet, and she wished she didn't have to meet him.

CHAPTER V

THE DUTCH SPRINGS bank was on Main Street, in the same block as the Jewel Hotel but down the street and on the opposite side from it. The small lobby was separated from the street by plate glass windows, and at the back of the lobby was a wooden partition with two grillwork openings facing the street.

A neat wooden sign above one grille said, TELLER. Mrs. Dodds sat behind that opening from nine to four every day waiting to take in money for deposit, or to pay out cash on checks presented to her. Mostly, Mrs. Dodds waited.

A sign over the other grille said CASHIER. There was a high wooden stool behind it for Rudd Fleming, but he seldom sat on it. He spent most of the time fooling around with the big ledgers in the rear, or counting the cash, or sitting in his little private office at the back and explaining such things. He was very patient and he always had plenty of time for everyone. He had a way of making a man feel good while he was being refused a much-needed loan. On the other hand, he often loaned out money without any collateral at all—and the bank never lost on those transactions, for Fleming was a shrewd judge of human nature.

He was just naturally a born banker. He was only thirty-five years old, but he had the instinct for it.

And he was popular in Powder Valley; even those who had been refused loans couldn't help liking the young fellow. He made them feel it was their fault and not the bank's.

Though his official title was only Cashier, Rudd Fleming ran the Dutch Springs bank practically as a one-man show. He made the policies and directed them. There was a Board of Directors consisting of a few wealthy ranchers who owned stock in the bank, but they only met semi-annually to approve Rudd Fleming's report and pat him on the back when he handed out dividends.

Rudd didn't look like a banker, or at least he didn't look like most bankers. He had broad shoulders and a strong athletic body, and he wore baggy pants and an old sweater or a leather jacket even at such important times as when he met with the Board.

He had a strong, clean-shaven face with laughing gray eyes and a determined chin, and a good, wide, generous mouth. None of the residents of Powder Valley could quite figure out why he had come there from the East and invested a lot of capital in a little one-horse bank. He looked like he ought to be on Wall Street, or riding around over the ocean on a yacht, or something like that.

But he'd been in Dutch Springs now for going on four years, and he seemed perfectly contented to stay there. Of course, the Board knew he had some personal money not invested in the bank which he often loaned out at higher-than-legal interest rates to borrowers that weren't considered good risks by the bank; and it was generally conceded that he was making plenty of money all right, but that still didn't seem a good enough reason for him to stay.

He lived at the Jewel Hotel and ate his meals there, and had exemplary habits. He never took a drink and he never gambled, and he sent off to New York for books which he read in the evenings up in the solitude of his hotel room.

SCHOOL let out the same time the bank closed, at four o'clock. The schoolhouse was two blocks farther down the street, on the outskirts of the town.

For a week, now, Rudd Fleming had managed to have his bookwork finished and to be puttering around in the front behind the plate glass windows at a little after four o'clock when the school children and their teacher came along the street from school.

Each afternoon Connie Dawson looked in and smiled at him as she passed. They had been introduced in the lobby of the hotel the first Sunday afternoon after Connie and Daniel Deever arrived from Denver. She and her religiously-inclined uncle had taken rooms in the hotel for the first few days after their arrival, until Mrs. Leroy who had a big house up the street decided the hotel wasn't a fitting place for the nice young teacher to stay and offered Connie and Mr. Deever room and board in her house.

Rudd Fleming found the evenings dull and flavorless after Connie moved away from the hotel. He had spoken to her only that first time when they were introduced, but it had been pleasant to watch her eating supper at a table across the dining room, and when she sat awhile in the lobby after supper he'd found he was reluctant to go upstairs to his reading which had always been enough for him in the past.

In the beginning Rudd Fleming sternly set himself against the interest Connie aroused in him. Four years ago he had come West to get away from a woman.

And he had been safe—until Connie Dawson came along. He hadn't worried about the advent of a new schoolteacher. There had been a succession of teachers since he'd been in Dutch Springs. Tall females of indeterminate age, with stringy hair and buck teeth and a simpering way of talking. Connie was different. She was like no Dutch Springs schoolteacher had ever been before. She wore clothes that had simple style, and she was poised and quiet and she didn't giggle. She reminded Rudd Fleming painfully of his rea-

son for coming West. Her uncle, too, seemed to be a cultured man.

Fleming finished adding up a long row of figures in a ledger and glanced at the clock. It was five minutes of four. He closed the ledger and slid off his stool, yawning and stretching. He saw Mrs. Dodds turn from her grille to watch him out of the corners of her eyes. He had an idea she'd noticed his restlessness this past week, but today he didn't care. He ostentatiously prolonged his yawn, reaching out to get his old leather jacket from a nail above his deak.

He slipped his arms into it and buttoned the two bottom buttons, got down a wide-brimmed white Stetson and set it on his head at a rakish angle. He sauntered out past Mrs. Dodds, pausing to say, "You may as well lock up and go on. There's nothing more to do today."

FLEMING stood in the lobby until he heard the first of the school children coming down the street. Then he settled his wide Stetson more firmly on his head and at slightly less of an angle and went out the front door onto the boardwalk. The blood was pulsing pleasantly in his veins and a sense of excitement gripped him. It was a good feeling. It had been too long since he had felt this way. Four years.

He saw Connie coming down the walk and his eyes narrowed hungrily. She had a red bandanna tied around her blond head and she wore a light wool coat with her hands thrust deep into the slanting pockets. She stepped gracefully along on the splintered and rotting boardwalk, and her face was flushed by the sharp autumnal air.

Rudd Fleming waited for her in the doorway. Three or four of the larger girls, ten years or so of age, were walking with the teacher. He saw their eyes grow big and round and secretively interested when they saw him waiting there. He set his strong jaw against the sure knowledge that by night time everyone in Dutch Springs would know he had waited at the bank to walk home with the teacher.

Connie didn't seem to mind either. She looked him straight in the eyes and smiled as she came opposite him, and slowed her swinging pace to let the children go on ahead. They did so, skipping along gaily and turning to look back over their shoulders. Rudd Fleming lifted his hat and took two steps to Connie's side, asking, "Do you mind if I accompany you?"

She wasn't coy about it. He liked that. She said, "I'd like it, Mr. Fleming."

He said, "I've watched you going by after school each evening. I'm in the bank, you know."

Connie nodded. She said, "Yes. I know," and managed to convey by her tone that of course she knew because his importance in Dutch Springs was such that one couldn't very well help being aware of him.

"You're from Denver, aren't you?"

Connie said, "Yes." They reached the end of the business block and stepped down into the dust to cross the street. Rudd Fleming took her arm and held it until they were across. He said, "Denver must be a very cosmopolitan city."

"Haven't you been there?" Connie looked at him in surprise and with some thankfulness.

"Only to pass through on my way down here from the East. Did you teach school there?"

Connie shook her bandannaed head and told him frankly, "This is my first experience."

Rudd Fleming was surprised. "You don't seem so young," he protested. "That is—I don't mean you're old, of course, but—"

"I'm twenty-five." She knocked only seven years off her true age, watching him covertly to see if he believed her. He seemed to.

"I haven't had to work before," she explained. "Until father died this summer. He was interested in gold mines." She made her voice sound vague.

He said, "That's too bad, Miss Dawson. Do you like teaching?"

"I think I will," she said with real warmth. "The children here are nice

—though I'm forever being afraid one of them will know more than I do, for I'm really an awful ignoramus," she ended ruefully.

THEY were off the boardwalk now, following a sandy footpath between the road and the widely scattered houses.

Rudd Fleming said, "I don't believe that, Miss Dawson. You're probably being very modest. I'm sure Dutch Springs is lucky to have you."

Connie liked his voice, and she liked the firm feel of his hand on her arm. She couldn't remember any man who had ever treated her like a lady before. She was being desperately careful with her words and with her voice, and she hated herself because she was fooling him. He was a swell fellow, all right. Too swell to be taken in by a woman like her.

She said, "This is where I'm boarding," and turned in at the sagging gate in front of a two-story unpainted frame house.

He went up the path with her onto the porch. He took off his hat and said, "It's been a great pleasure. I wonder—could you go driving with me Sunday?"

She said, "Thank you. I'll be pleased to accept your invitation," and made her voice sound very formal without meeting his eyes.

He said, "I'll call for you Sunday afternoon," and put on his hat and went down the path.

Connie went in listlessly and went up the uncarpeted stairs to her room. The door next to hers came open while she was turning her knob. Daniel Deever looked out at her with an unpleasant smile on his face. He was collarless and in his shirtsleeves. The smell of liquor came to her when he hiccoughed loudly.

He said, "I was watching out the window when you walked up. I'd say Judge Prink'll be mighty pleased."

"The judge," she said between her teeth, "can go to hell." She started into her room.

Daniel Deever's face grew stern. He caught her wrist and pulled her back. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

"There'd better not be," he snarled. "Remember, the rest of us are interested in your banker too. We're all in this together. Don't be getting any ideas."

She said, "We're going driving Sunday afternoon."

"Good." He released her wrist. "There's nothing like the Sabbath and a pretty girl to soften a man's heart." He hiccoughed again and smirked at her. "The judge certainly picked a lay for us this time. Like lambs to be led to the slaughter. I'm invited to dinner by Mrs. Jenkins after church. And you've got nothing to kick about." His voice hardened. "Look what *I've* got to work on and consider yourself thrice-blessed."

She said viciously, "I wish Mr. Fleming was an old goat with snag teeth and a nasty mind." She went into her room and slammed the door loudly while a look of blank astonishment spread over Daniel Deever's face.

CHAPTER VI

AFTER THE noon meal on Saturday, Pat Stevens pushed his plate aside and asked Sally, "Do you mind driving into town alone after the groceries this afternoon?"

Sally looked up with a quick little frown when she heard his tone. He had been moody and silent all through the meal, and she knew that something important was bothering Pat when he was that way.

She said, "Of course I don't mind." And after a moment's hesitation added, "Are you going to be busy out on the range?"

"Nope." Pat's bronzed face was set in hard lines. "Ezra's taking care of the work all right." Without looking directly at his wife he went on to explain with too much casualness, "Thought I'd best drop in at the K Bar an' see what's got into Dock that he's spendin' so much time over there."

"I don't think you need to worry, Pat. He says Mr. Crane is awfully nice to him."

"I don't mind him stopping by after school every day, but when he slips off from Saturday work and streaks over there it's time he and I had a little talk."

"Did Dock do that—today?"

Pat Stevens nodded glumly. "Without sayin' a word to Ezra or me." He got up from the table and squared his big shoulders. "I've been meaning to have a talk with Crane anyhow. Thought I'd sort of feel him out on maybe gettin' the ranch for Ezra to take over. If it's money he wants—" He paused expressively.

Oh yes, Pat. I'm glad you're going to see him."

"I'll harness the team to the surrey for you, an' I'll ride over. Might be I'll drop into town later on an' see you there. I been wanting to have a little talk with Judge Prink too."

His mild tone did not deceive Sally. She said, "You're not going to blame the judge for Mr. Crane getting the K Bar, are you?"

Pat smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "Might be we'd talk about that." He bent over Sally and kissed her cheek. "Don't be worryin' your pretty head about such things." He strode out rapidly to harness the team for Sally, and she watched him go with a look of dismay on her face. She had a strange feeling that trouble was brewing in Powder Valley. She could always tell by the way Pat acted.

AS HE RODE toward the K Bar ranch a short time later, Pat Stevens made an honest effort to sort out and analyze the reasons that were sending him there. Dock, of course, needed to be disciplined for slipping off without doing the work his father had laid out for him on Saturday. Pat wasn't a particularly stern parent, but he did believe a boy of Dock's age should be required to perform certain tasks on the ranch, and up to this time he'd always found Dock eager to do his part. It wasn't like the boy to evade work.

But the irritation went deeper than that. Without ever having met the man, Pat had already conceived a violent dislike for his new neighbor on the south. It had begun, he knew, when Gilbert Crane took over the ranch under Ezra's nose with what appeared to be Judge Prink's connivance. And it had grown stronger through the following days when Dock came home late from school each evening with some glowing story about Crane, or about one of his hands named Gut-Luck Lasher, or about the drunken Irishman named Timothy O'Connor.

On principle, Pat Stevens disapproved of gunmen taking up residence in the Valley. From Dock's descriptions of Gut-Luck, he knew the man was more of a gunman than a ranch hand. Few men wore their 45's any more in the Valley. They were simply regarded as excess weight. As sheriff, it was Pat's job to watch out for a rannie who wore his gun in a fancy swiveled holster with the bottom cut out of it. And he disapproved of drunkenness; that was something they didn't have much of in the Valley. Oh, the young punchers would come to town of a pay night and get tanked up sometimes, but no one paid much attention to that. Young fellows had always done that on pay nights.

But a confirmed drunkard was another matter, and Pat had a hunch that that's exactly what Timothy O'Connor was. He hadn't met the Denver Irishman yet, but there was plenty of talk about him in Dutch Springs and a lot of people wondered why Gilbert Crane had brought an old fellow like him out to work on a horse ranch.

All in all, Pat felt there were plenty of legitimate reasons for the sheriff to drop in on the K Bar for a look-see. What he hated to admit to himself was that Dock's sudden and intense interest in the ranch of Gilbert Crane sort of rankled. He hated to think he was jealous of his own son, but a father just naturally hopes his boy will look up to him more than to any other man.

BACK of it all, sort of hazily in the background, was the fat and somehow sinister figure of J. Worthington Prink. Pat didn't think of him as being sinister. All he knew was that the fat judge had rubbed him the wrong way ever since he came to Dutch Springs. It was more of an instinctive feeling than anything else. Nothing he could put his finger on. Other people liked the affable fat man, but Pat mistrusted him. Maybe it was because he had gone out of his way to win the sheriff over. Pat always mistrusted a man who seemed too anxious to please. He always figured an honest man could afford to go straight along without bothering about whether people liked him or not—taking his chances on that.

And for years Pat had been mistrusting all outsiders who came into the Valley. Maybe they were all right, but he always waited for them to prove themselves before he was ready to accept them.

For, more than anything else, Pat Stevens was jealous of the security and the placid contentment of life in Powder Valley. They had fought for their valley, and men had died for it. They had built it up into what it was by their own efforts, and not a rancher in the Valley but had taken some part in those past struggles. People who came in now were sharing the security they had fought and died for, and it was natural to resent them.

No, Pat couldn't quite put his finger on the source of the uneasiness that had become a part of him during the past weeks, but he couldn't rid himself of a strong feeling that the Valley faced another crisis. For one thing, there were too many newcomers drifting in all at once. It didn't seem right. There was Gilbert Crane and his ill-assorted pair of ranch hands, and there was the new schoolteacher and her uncle. Pat hadn't met Miss Dawson yet, but Deever had been pointed out to him on the street and he had heard the man was powerfully religious and sort of loud-mouthed about it. Pat had an idea that a man's religion was something he ought to keep to himself and he didn't particularly cotton to the looks of Daniel Deever. The man didn't seem to have any business in the Valley, and that was enough to arouse suspicion of him.

The K Bar ranch house was set down in the head of a small coulee where it ended abruptly against a steep slope. It was a small weather-beaten frame house with a tangle of outhouses and corrals behind it.

Pat didn't see anybody about when he rode up in front of the house. He swung off and ground-tied his horse and went to the front door and knocked loudly. When he got no response, he went around toward the sheds and corrals in back.

He heard Dock's excited laughter before he saw anyone. Then he rounded the disused bunkhouse and saw a man seated on the top rail of a small horse pen. He knew the man was Gilbert Crane from Dock's description of their new neighbor. He wore a flannel shirt with bright red and black checks, and a pair of trousers that were too tight in the hips for his girth, and spread out into wide legs at the bottom. He had leather cuffs on his wrists and a wide Stetson pushed back on his head, and he was chuckling at the antics of a black colt that Dock was trying to pet inside the railed enclosure.

Pat strolled up behind the rancher and put his foot on the bottom rail. He said mildly, "That's a right nice lookin' colt."

STARTLED by the unexpected voice, Crane turned to look down at him. Pat saw a florid, good-natured face and a pair of laughing gray eyes.

Crane said, "Howdy, stranger," and then he saw the silver star on Pat's vest. His eyes narrowed for an instant, then he swung down from his perch and offered his hand.

"You must be Sheriff Pat Stevens. Welcome to the K Bar, sheriff."

Pat took his hand and got a hearty grip from Crane. At the same moment he heard Dock gasp out, "Dad!"

and then, in a more subdued tone, "Hiya, Dad."

Pat looked past Crane and said, "Hello, Dock."

Dock came toward him slowly, scuffing up the corral dust with his boots. When he was near the two men he began talking rapidly. "I'm sorry I slipped off over here this mornin', Dad, but Gilbert had promised to let me pick out a colt for my own today an' I didn't want to miss out on it 'cause I'd a'ready seen this here black 'un an' I knew I wanted him an' if I didn't get here maybe I'd be too late." He drew in a long breath and lifted wretched eyes to his father's stern face.

Pat asked, "Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

Dock hesitated, then admitted manfully, "'Cause I was afraid you wouldn't let me if I told you."

Pat said, "You were right. Get your hawse and start ridin' back to the ranch."

Dock hesitated, kicking the corral dust with the toe of his boot. "Kin I—take Black Lightnin' back with me?"

Pat said, "No."

"Oh, see here, Mr. Stevens," Crane interposed jovially. "I gave the colt to the lad fair and square. Belongs to him now. I'd say he can do what he pleases with it."

Pat said, "I'll furnish my boy with his riding stock when I figure he needs it." His voice was cold and inflexible. "Get to ridin', Dock."

The lad swallowed hard at a lump in his throat. He turned his head miserably when the colt whinnied softly and sidled up toward him on its long legs. He put out his hand to touch the colt's soft muzzle, and then turned away stiffly and went out the gate.

"That's a mighty fine colt, Stevens," Crane told him. "Half Morgan out of a Mexican mare. Make a real piece of riding flesh for the boy when he grows up. Don't pick up a colt with that blood in his veins every day."

"All the more reason for you to keep him," Pat said coldly.

"Now, I don't take that as very neighborly. No sir, I sure don't. I like the boy, Stevens. I've took a great shine to him. Just like he was my own. Yes sir. That's one of the things I miss most—having a boy of my own."

Dock came whirling around a corner at a lope on his pinto pony. He swept past the two men without looking at them and rode at a headlong gallop back toward the Lazy Mare ranch.

Pat watched him grimly. He said, "Maybe I don't feel neighborly toward you, Crane. Bribin' a boy Dock's age with a black colt ain't my way to start bein' friends."

"Well, sir. I never thought of it that way. I sure didn't. I s'posed you knew he'd come over for the colt."

Pat turned on him squarely. "I'm not blamin' you for what Dock does —not yet. But I don't want him hanging around here."

Crane shrugged and laughed. "That's up to you, sheriff. But I don't see any call to get wringy."

Pat controlled his temper with an effort. "We'll forget it. What I come by for mostly was to see how you feel about sellin' or leasin' this ranch."

GILBERT CRANE took out a match and bit it in two with his strong teeth. "I'm not interested a-tall. There was a one-eyed simpleton by here about a week ago that asked me the same question. Said *he* had figured on gettin' the ranch to raise hawses on." Crane laughed loudly. "Didn't look like he had sense enough to raise his own hat if he met a lady."

"Happens," said Pat darkly, "that was Ezra—my best friend."

"Oh," Crane sobered immediately. "I'm sorry I said that. I reckon he's all right but he sounded kind of simple-minded when he was talking to me."

"Ezra's had his eye on this ranch ever since the owner died. He'd spoke for it to Judge Prink soon as the estate was settled. Ezra an' me both figure it was a dirty deal for

you to come in an' grab it up under his nose."

"That's business," Crane ejaculated. "Didn't have any option, did he?"

Pat shook his head stubbornly. "He'd spoke for it. He ought've had the chance to meet yore price."

"I didn't know anything about that." Crane spoke truthfully. "I made my deal with Prink in Denver—with him acting as executor of the estate."

"All right," said Pat sharply, "maybe you didn't know Ezra had what you might call a prior claim. You know it now. How'd you like to sell out for a good profit?"

Crane shook his head. "I like it here in Powder Valley. I'm bringing in some Morgan studs and I aim to build up a real herd of saddle stuff. I reckon I'll just hang on to the K Bar for a spell anyway."

"How long," asked Pat abruptly, "have you known Judge Prink?"

"Quite some time."

"Old friend of yores, huh?"

"Sort of," Gilbert Crane agreed cautiously.

"That's what I reckoned. An' he used his place as judge to sell you this ranch at yore own price." Pat Stevens was mad clear through by this time. "Sounds mighty nigh crooked to me."

"Them are hard words," Crane told him.

"I mean 'em that way. How much did you pay for the ranch?"

Crane was taken aback by the out-and-out question. Actually, of course, he hadn't paid a cent for it. He didn't even know whether it was in his name or not. He didn't know what method Prink had used to gain control of the property. The judge had arranged for him to take possession and pose as the owner, but Crane didn't know anything more than that.

He parried the sheriff's question. "I don't know the price is your business."

"The hell it ain't," Pat grated. "Bein' executor, the judge is bound by law to get the most he could for the property for the heirs. If he took less from you than Ezra stood ready to pay, then the heirs got beat out of their just due."

"What's all that to you? You one of the heirs?"

"I'm the sheriff here. It's my business to see that no crooked stuff is done. By law I got the right to know what you paid." Pat didn't know about the law on a matter like this, but he felt he was right and he never bothered much about legal technicalities when they got in the way of what was right.

AT THAT moment a man strolled around one of the sheds toward them. He was young and lean, and he carried himself with a swagger. A wide cartridge belt slanted downward on his right hip, carrying the cut-off holster that Dock had described to his father. His eyes were hard and his mouth wore an insolent smile as he approached the two men. He looked Pat Stevens up and down, and his upper lip curled away from his teeth when he saw the lawman's star on Pat's vest. He asked Crane:

"Havin' trouble, boss?"

Crane turned on him quickly and shook his head, forcing a placating smile to his lips. "No trouble, Gut-Luck. This here is Sheriff Stevens. You know, Dock Stevens' daddy."

Gut-Luck Lasher acknowledged the introduction with a brief nod. He hooked his thumbs in his gun belt and asked coldly, "What's he kickin' up a rumpus about?"

"He's not kicking up a rumpus," Crane hastened to reassure his impatient gunman.

"Don't go to no trouble on my account," Pat told him angrily. "I don't have to have my business explained to no two-bit gun slinger."

"Yo're not packin' a gun," Gut-Luck said coldly.

"Hasn't been any skunks in the Valley that needed killin' till you fellows moved in," Pat told him. He saw Gut-Luck's face harden at the insult, and he saw Crane shake his head at the hot-headed young fellow. He had a feeling there was something plenty queer going on here, but he couldn't quite make out what it was all about.

"Tim's not here," he heard Crane telling Gut-Luck in what seemed to be a warning voice. "He's in town getting a bottle."

Pat shrugged and started to turn away from the pair. He told them, "This ain't the end—of *anything*. You can tell yore lead-slingin' hand that I'm gonna start wearin' my guns from here on out, Crane, an' I'm still waitin' for an answer to that question I asked you. Maybe Judge Prink will have an answer to it."

He strode away angrily, around the bunkhouse and up to his horse in the front yard. He swung into the saddle and set out for Dutch Springs at a slow lope without looking back.

CHATPER VII

PAT STEVENS was still plenty mad when he got into Dutch Springs. He kept his horse at a lope along Main Street, rode straight on to the jail and the sheriff's office. He tied his horse outside and went into the deserted office, pulled out the bottom drawer of the desk and got out a cartridge belt and gun. It was a spare that he kept in town so he could buckle it on if trouble caught him unarmed.

He didn't know, now, just why he was arming himself before he went to see Judge Prink. He didn't like to carry a gun unless he was preparing to make an arrest. He had an idea that a sheriff had a better chance to preserve peace if he didn't go around carrying a six-shooter in front of everybody.

But he had a funny feeling this Saturday afternoon that hell was getting ready to break loose. For one thing, he didn't like the looks of Gut-Luck Lasher. He'd had plenty of experience with gun-fast hombres. A man gets a certain look in his eyes after he's killed a few men. It gets to be an obsession with them. It gives them an important feeling of carrying the power of life and death in their holsters. They get to look down with contempt on other men.

Pat had seen that look in Gut-Luck Lasher's eyes. He slowly buckled the stiff belt about his waist while he thought back over the scene at the K Bar ranch. None of it added up just right. Lasher had been honing for trouble, that was a cinch, and Crane had held him back. Well, that part made sense, Pat had to admit grudgingly to himself. Crane would be a fool if he let his hand gun-down an unarmed sheriff on his ranch.

On the other hand, Pat had a feeling it had only been a sort of reprieve. Well, he had accepted the challenge. He'd told them clear enough that he'd be wearing his guns the next time they met. He settled the unfamiliar belt down over his hips and stalked out of the door.

Judge Prink had his office at the end of the block near the jail. It was an old deserted store building that the judge had rented when he first came to Dutch Springs. He had a partition built all the way across the inside, and wooden bookshelves put up along the wall. There were three chairs inside the front part, and a door leading through the partition with the word PRIVATE on it in big black letters.

The front part was vacant when Pat walked in. The door was closed and he could hear the murmur of voices from the private room in the back. He decided to wait awhile, and he sat down in one of the chairs. From the sound of the voices he could tell that the judge was talking to some woman, but he couldn't tell who it was.

He waited fifteen or twenty minutes before he heard a chair being pushed back in the rear room, then the sound of footsteps and the knob turning.

The door into the rear office opened inward and he heard Judge Prink saying, "Of course, Mrs. Jenkins. I quite agree that a large property such as yours is quite a strain on a woman. I'm glad to have you come in whenever you feel the need of legal advice."

Then Pat heard the widow Jenkins' voice: "I'm sure I'll get help —from Beyond, you know. Tod was an unbeliever, but I'm sure he knows

different *now*. I'm sure the mockingbird is a sign—don't you think so?"

"Perhaps, my dear lady. Perhaps. I don't profess to understand these mysteries and if you can get help and advice from one who does—Ah! Sheriff Stevens." The judge followed his bulbous belly through the door and saw Pat Stevens sitting there.

PAT NODDED. He got up and took off his hat when Mrs. Myra Jenkins came out. "Howdy, Mrs. Jenkins. Got yore cattle down from the high country yet?"

"How-de-do, Sheriff Stevens." Mrs. Jenkins was tying a pink sunbonnet under her sharp chin. "Jud's managing things for me right well, I guess."

"Jud's a mighty good cowman," Pat told her gravely. "I'd take his advice on 'most anything, I reckon."

"Yes. He's like Tod. He understands cows." Mrs. Jenkins was pulling a pair of leather gauntlets on her withered hands. "But he's so *material* and worldly. I—Have you met Mr. Deever, sheriff?"

Pat said, "No."

Mrs. Jenkins said, "He's so different. Thank you for your advice, Judge Prink." She went out the door.

The judge closed it behind her. Pat sat down and asked abruptly. "What kind of advice was Myra after?"

The judge turned and pursed his pink lips at the Powder Valley sheriff. "I make it a point not to discuss the affairs of my clients."

"You've got no right to have private clients since you've been appointed District Judge," Pat told him. "It ain't fitting."

Judge Prink's eyes became smaller behind the puffy flesh on his cheeks. "Did you come here to discuss legal ethics with me?"

Pat said, "Yes."

The judge exhaled softly and said, "Ah." His eyes glittered but he kept a smile on his round fat face. He settled himself in a creaking chair and carefully placed a dimpled hand on each fat knee. "Aren't you forgetting that you're only the sheriff? Mrs Jenkins came to me for advice and I gave it to her—as I will to any citizen who requests it."

Pat waved his hand and said, "I didn't come here to talk about Myra Jenkins an' her crazy ideas on religion. I stopped by the K Bar ranch on my way into town."

Judge Prink said, "Indeed?"

"Yeh. Crane admitted to me that you and him fixed up a private deal for him to take over the ranch—without you gettin' Ezra's bid on it."

The judge chuckled gently. His fat jowls quivered and his belly heaved up and down. "I was appointed public executor of the estate."

"That's why you hadn't no right to fix up a deal like that."

"The heirs are satisfied with the price they received."

"Maybe. But do they know there was another bidder—that maybe Ezra would of paid more?" Pat demanded angrily.

The judge lifted one fat hand and chuckled all over. "Ezra? I checked his financial standing, of course. I really didn't consider him a responsible bidder."

"The hell you didn't." Pat's face was dark with anger. "Him an' me have always been pardners—along with Sam Sloan. I guess the three of us could have raked up enough money to buy the K Bar, lock, stock an' barrel."

"But I didn't understand that he represented a syndicate. I thought he was acting in his own behalf, and I made what I considered the most advantageous deal for the heirs."

"How much?" Pat asked shortly.

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"How much did Crane pay for the ranch?"

THE JUDGE shook his head from side to side. "If you were familiar with the law you wouldn't ask that question, sheriff. I'm accountable to the heirs and no one else. As long as they're satisfied—" Judge Prink made another gesture with his fat hand and returned it to his knee.

Pat said, "Maybe it's legal but it sure ain't right. Ezra had spoke to you first."

The judge said incisively, "As long as it was legal you have no complaint."

Pat got up slowly. Unconsciously his right hand strayed down toward the gun butt at his hip. He twisted the brim of his hat and said, "We've got along mighty good here in Powder Valley without havin' no lawyers tell us what was legal an' what wasn't. We never bothered to put some things in writin' because we always trusted a man to do what was right. Seems like that's all changed now."

The judge rocked back and forth gently. His eyes were slitted so Pat could see only a faint gleam from them, but they reminded him of the malevolent eyes of a Gila monster. "I don't like what you're saying, Stevens. If you have a legal complaint, make it in a legal manner."

Pat snorted loudly "To the district judge, I reckon."

"Why yes," Prink purred. "The district court is the proper place."

"Looks like yo're fixed up pretty good—settin' as district judge an' passin' on what you do as public executor."

"It's the law," Judge Prink told him. "In part 3, chapter 18 of the Civil Code—"

"Maybe," Pat interrupted him. "But none of us here in the Valley ever read as far as chapter eighteen, I reckon." He turned and strode out of the judge's office, slamming the door behind him like an angry schoolboy and feeling a whole lot like one.

He went down the street, nodding grimly to friends and neighbors who gave him a cheery greeting, paying no attention to their looks of surprise as he passed them by without really knowing whom he was passing.

Things had come to a hell of a mess in Powder Valley, he told himself angrily, when they let a stranger come in with his law books and start telling them what was what. He'd been afraid of something like this all along. Too much civilization, that was it. He felt completely frustrated and depressed, and was absurdly conscious of the gun swinging at his hip. A gun wasn't any good when a man started quoting law books to you.

HE WAS striding past Mr. Winters' general store when the door opened suddenly and Sally stepped out with her arms full of groceries.

Pat bumped into his wife and almost bowled her over before he saw her.

Sally started a laughing comment on his clumsiness, then her eyes widened when she saw his angry face and the gun strapped around his waist. She cried out, "Oh Pat! What is it?"

His face softened and he bent down to pick up a sack of groceries he'd knocked out of her arms. "I wasn't looking where I was going," he muttered, avoiding her eyes. "It's—everything's all right."

"But you're wearing your gun, Pat. Did you have trouble at the K Bar?"

"Nothing to talk about. I packed Dock off home where he belonged." Pat took another sack from her arms and carried them to the back of the surrey at the hitchrack in front of the store.

Sally gave him the others to stow away, watching him anxiously for a clue to the grimness of his face. When all the groceries were put away, she asked, "Why don't you ride on home with me if you've finished your business? You can lead your saddlehorse behind."

Pat said, "You'd better drive on. I'm not quite through in town."

"I can wait for ou. Go on down to the Gold Eagle and get a few drinks, if you want. "I'm not in any hurry."

Pat said gently, "It isn't a few drinks I'm stayin' in for, Sally. I got to do some checkin' up on a couple of things."

"Have you seen Judge Prink about the ranch yet?"

"Yes. I saw him."

"Can you get it for Ezra?"

"I'm afraid not, Sally. Seems like Crane's got a legal right to keep it if he wants." Pat took his wife tightly by the arm and helped her up into the surrey. "You drive on home, honey. Tell Dock to get the chores done up."

He stood on the boardwalk and watched her drive away, not quite knowing why he had acted as he had. He didn't know what kind of trouble he anticipated, nor why he had insisted on staying in town instead of riding back with her and leading his horse. There was a rankling feeling of indecision inside him. He turned and went on slowly down the boardwalk toward the Gold Eagle Saloon.

The loud blast of gunfire came out from the saloon just as he reached the swinging doors. He shouldered the doors open and drew his gun as he went in. A group of ranchers stood at the bar looking at an old man who swayed back and forth on widespread legs in the middle of the floor. The old man had a smoking sixgun in his hand and he was waving it in the air and laughing. Pat had never seen him before.

He stopped laughing when he saw the star on Pat's vest. Timothy O'Connor's bleary eyes narrowed cunningly and he swung the weapon down to draw a bead on the sheriff's stomach. He quavered drunkenly, "Don't come no nearer. Not a step, d'yuh hear me?"

Pat could have shot him from the hip. He didn't like to shoot an old drunken man. He stopped and said amiably, "Why don't you put yore shootin' iron down, stranger, an' we'll talk it over?"

"No siree. Not me. I know you. You're the law. You'll 'rest me if I put my gun down." The heavy weapon wavered and sagged.

PAT LEAPED forward just as it exploded. A bullet tore a hole in the floor where he had been standing. He caught the barrel of the .45 and wrested it from O'Connor's hand. The old man slumped down cross-legged on the floor and started crying.

Pat turned around disgustedly and asked the grinning ranchers, "What's this here all about?"

"He's jest drunk," several of them told him. "He had that gun under his shirt and none of us knew he had it till he hauled it out an' shot through the ceiling."

"Who is he?"

"New hand out to the K Bar," one of the lookers-on volunteered.

"How come," Pat asked the bartender angrily, "you let an ol' feller like him get so drunk in yore place? You know that ain't right."

"He didn't drink much in here. I swear he didn't. Bought a couple of bottles like he does most every day, an' he musta slipped out back an' drunk one of them."

Pat holstered his own gun and laid the other weapon on the bar. He bent over the sniveling old man and caught hold of one thin arm. "C'mon now," he said not unkindly. "See if can you stand up by yoreself."

Timothy O'Connor tried to pull away from him, and cursed him in a weak voice.

Unperturbed, Pat pulled him up and dragged him toward the door, demanding, "Where's yore hawse?"

Timothy weakly indicated a saddled horse outside, and went on cursing Pat Stevens and all lawmen.

Pat hoisted him up into the saddle and put the reins in his hand. He gave the animal a slap on the rump and sent him down the dusty main street toward home and then re-entered the saloon.

Two or three of his friends laughed loudly as he entered, but the bartender shook his head dubiously and drew the sheriff aside to warn him.

"A drunk old man ain't nothin' to be afeered of, I grant you that. But I'd watch out for him, Pat. He talks like he used to be a fancy gun slinger in his younger days, an' when he gets drunk he craves to throw lead at lawmen. He's been pumpin' me 'bout you too, sorta. You know, askin' questions."

Pat said, "I won't worry none about him. An' you'd better stop selling him whiskey. You know the rules in Powder Valley."

"I know." The bartender looked embarrassed. "I never let a man get drunk in the Gold Eagle, Pat. But that old coot buys it by the bottle all the time."

"Quit sellin' him bottles, then," Pat advised, and went on to join the others at the bar for a drink.

CHAPTER VIII

PAT STEVENS was still in the Gold Eagle Saloon at dusk when Sam Sloan came in after making his Pony Express ride into Dutch Springs from the south.

Sam was as dark and leathery as ever but somehow he wasn't quite as he had been before he married Kitty Lane. His face had filled out some under the influence of Kitty's cooking, and some of the lines had been erased. He had a relaxed look, and he smiled more easily and more often than had been his wont. He had taken to wearing clean shirts too, and shaving at least every other day.

He greeted Pat with a wide grin when he saw him in the saloon, and lifted his black eyebrows at sight of the gun on the sheriff's hip. "Who you think yo're gonna scare with that ol' hawg leg?" he asked Pat affectionately. "I thought you had ever'body buffaloed so you didn't need to pack a gun no more."

"With you turned honest," Pat told him, "there sure ain't much crime hereabouts no more." He nodded to the bartender to set out another glass, adding, "I'll buy a drink if you're not afraid it'll set yore belly on fire."

"I ain't used to it," Sam admitted gravely. "Since I've been married I've found out water's just as healthy an' a lot cheaper. Who you gunnin' for tonight?"

One of the men beside Pat laughed loudly. "Pat's got him a private war declared," he told Sam Sloan. "That old codger from the K Bar is gonna get him if he ever sobers up enough to hold a gun steady."

"That right, Pat?"

"I had to spank him an' send him home," Pat admitted.

Sam emptied his glass and frowned down into it. "I've heard talk about the new outfit at the K Bar but I ain't run into them. I thought Ezra figgered on takin' it over."

Pat said shortly, "A guy named Crane from Denver beat him to it, looks like. Stayin' in town overnight?"

"Yep. I ride the mail back in the mawnin'. If you kin make out to stay away from Sally that long, how about eatin' supper with me up to the hotel?"

Pat said "Sure," and they had another drink. They lingered in the saloon for a time and Pat knew Sam had something troubling his mind, but the dark man didn't mention it until they stepped outside and started to stroll up to the Jewel Hotel. Then he drew in a long breath and asked abruptly:

"How'd you feel, Pat, when you knowed Sally was gonna have a baby?"

Pat took a little time before answering. He honestly tried to remember how he had felt. He said gravely, "Mighty happy an' proud, the way I recollect it. How's Kitty comin' along?"

"Fine, I reckon. She swears she's fine. You mean you wasn't scared, Pat? Didn't you ever get to thinkin' that if anything went wrong that it'd be *yore* fault? That you didn't have no right to put a job like that up to a woman?"

Pat said, "Kitty's young an' strong. Nothin'll happen to her."

"Mebby not. But I tell you, Pat, I damn near feel like prayin' sometimes."

They ate supper together at a table in the back of the room, and Sam changed the subject abruptly. "See that tall thin guy settin' over yonder by hisself?"

PAT looked in the direction Sam indicated. He saw a middle-aged man with a calm face and fine features. He wore a white shirt and a flowered broadcloth vest, and a flowing tie with a huge horseshoe stickpin. His hands were white and soft, and he had long smooth fingers like a woman's.

Pat said, "More strangers. What's he doin' in Dutch Springs?"

"Nothin'. 'Cept gamblin' some in the evenings. They call him Windy Rivers on account of, I reckon, he don't never say nothing. But he's shore a whiz at stud poker," Sam ended ruefully.

Pat grinned at him. "You been getting yore fingers burned again?"

"Not bad. I've sat in a couple of games with him an' Tom Dasher. Dollar limit, though. That's the most I'll play."

"Since learnin' yore lesson at Corpse's Corner?" chuckled Pat.

"That's right." Sam Sloan was unabashed at Pat's reminder. He chuckled himself. "Ezry an' me shore got took that time. On a Corpse's Corner fling," he ended disgustedly.

There was a queer look of questioning on Pat's face. He was silently counting on his fingers, not paying much attention to Sam. He muttered, "That's seven—counting the judge."

Sam looked at him curiously. "What'd you say? Seven what?"

Pat Stevens shrugged and leaned back in his chair. "Does this gamblin' man come from Denver too?"

"Windy Rivers? I dunno. Seems like I did hear him say somethin' about running a game there."

Pat looked around the dining room carefully and saw Judge Prink sitting alone at a big table. The judge had a napkin tucked under his bottom chin and was wrestling with a big steak and various side orders.

He said thoughtfully, "I wonder if Windy ever happened to meet Judge Prink in Denver?"

"I dunno. I never noticed them bein' friendly. What's got into you tonight, Pat?"

"I don't know," Pat told him honestly. "But I want you to start keepin' yore eyes open, Sam. Yo're in and out of town every day or so. Seems to me like we're getting too many foreigners in the Valley all at once. There's Crane an' his two men out to the K Bar. *They're* friends of the judge's. An' there's the new schoolteacher and her uncle. Prink brought *them* here. An' this here Windy Rivers. What's *he* doin' in a one hawse town like Dutch Springs? He's a big-city gambler if ever I seen one—an' I've seen plenty."

"I don't know 'bout him, but the new schoolteacher is shore doin' all right. Who you think she's got sparkin' her awready?"

"Who?"

"Rudd Fleming. That's who. Him that ain't looked at a gal onct in the four years he's been here. He's walked home with her from school twict this week, I heard, an' Terp Dixon down to the livery stable told me on the q.t. that Rudd has ordered a hawse an' buggy to go drivin' tomorrow afternoon."

"You're getting as gossipy as an old woman," Pat reproved him. "The teacher's uncle still here?"

"Yep. He got up at prayer meetin' Wednesday night an' did a heap of talkin', they do say. Got the widder Jenkins all weepy when he went on about the sperits of them that has passed away lookin' down from heaven an' watchin' ever'thing that goes on down here on earth. They say he tossed the Scriptures around terrible familiar for not bein' a preacher."

THE proprietor of the Jewel Hotel came to their table just then. Thomas Dasher was a big genial man who had made himself well liked in Dutch Springs since taking over the hotel after the demise of Joe Deems had cleared pretty Kitty Lane of the suspicion of murder hanging over her head. That was before Kitty married Sam Sloan, while she was still a cafe entertainer, and it was a chapter of her life that both Kitty and Sam were trying to forget.

Dasher said, "Howdy, sheriff. And Sam. Everything all right?"

Pat said, "The food'll do for a couple of fellows that can't get home for a good meal. Business good, Tom?"

"Fine," Dasher boomed with a satisfied glance around the well-filled dining room. "We don't see much of you around town, sheriff."

"Nope. I don't get in much."

"Some of the boys were talking about you the other night—saying you used to deal a fair hand of stud in your younger days."

"I did all right—in a friendly game."

"Best damned poker player west of the Mississippi," Sam put in enthusiastically.

"Why don't you sit in for a few hands tonight?" Dasher urged him. "Nice friendly little game."

Pat snorted loudly. "Friendly as a throat slittin', I betcha."

"Nice easy stakes," Dasher told him. He glanced behind him at Windy Rivers and lowered his voice confidentially. "Tell you what. There's a fellow staying here that I'm working up toward a real game one of these nights. Sort of egging him on, see? He's got a roll I'd like to bet into, but you know how a thing like that is. You've got to work up to a big game gradually. So I'd appreciate it if you two would sit in tonight."

He moved on to another table with a genial smile. Pat looked after him thoughtfully. "How good a poker player is Tom?"

Sam shrugged his thin shoulders. "Plenty good, I reckon. Anyhow, he shore thinks he is. He's allus growlin' because there ain't nobody hereabouts that'll play big stakes with him."

Pat said, "Let's sit in for a few hands after supper. I'm honing to find out something."

It didn't take Pat Stevens many hands to find out what he wanted to playing dollar-limit stud. The hotel owner and Windy Rivers, Pat and Sam, and another local rancher.

Tom Dasher was a good player. Pat conceded that at once. He knew the value of a hand, and he played a strong consistent game. He wasn't afraid to bet his money when the percentages were with him, yet he didn't mind throwing in a losing hand before he lost too much on it.

Pat quit the game after he'd lost his original stack of ten dollars. He shook his head and grinned when Dasher urged him to buy another stack. "I'm too rusty," he told them. "Besides, here's a couple other fellows waitin' to sit in. How about you, Sam? Had enough?"

Something in Pat's tone told Sam that his friend wanted him to quit too. Sam was six dollars ahead, but he reluctantly cashed in his chips and followed Pat to the bar.

"Why'd you want me to quit, Pat? I figger I had a winnin' streak comin'."

PAT ordered drinks for them both and waited until the bartender had retreated out of earshot. Then he muttered angrily, "You'd only win as long as Windy wanted you to."

Sam frowned at him. "I don't getcha."

"You're as bad as Dasher," Pat told him disgustedly. "Both of you need a nursemaid when it comes to playin' cards. I've seen that Windy play before. I recollect it plain now. Down in Tombstone, Arizona. Must be—I reckon near onto twenty years ago. He can do things with a deck of cards like Ezra can do followin' a week-old trail."

"You mean he's crooked?" Sam asked fiercely.

"You're not going to do nothin'." Pat caught his arm firmly. "Windy won't win much in a dollar-limit game. He's waitin' for a big game. A slicker like him ain't wasting time in Powder Valley just for his health. When it gets to be worth his trouble he'll do his tricks all right. An' Dasher is just getting primed to be took to the cleaners."

"Why not run him out of town right now?" Sam protested.

Pat shook his head. "Not yet. I'm beginnin' to get a hunch he's just part of something bigger."

He wouldn't tell Sam more than that. His suspicions were still so vague that he wasn't ready to put them into words But a feeling of excitement gripped him a short time later when he mounted his horse and rode homeward. He knew one thing for sure; he was going to start wearing both his guns in the morning.

CHAPTER IX

A SUDDEN IMPULSE turned Pat Stevens aside to ride by the K Bar ranch on his way home. He wasn't thinking about it particularly until he came to the forked roads in the bright moonlight, with one fork swinging to the right toward the K Bar. It wasn't far out of his way, and it was still the shank of the evening.

He had been thinking about Dock as he rode from town, remembering how the boy had looked at him that

noon when he ordered him to return home at once.

He'd been trying not to think about Dock all afternoon, but he couldn't help remembering how the boy had looked at the black colt his father was forcing him to give up. And Pat had begun remembering things about his own boyhood, dimly from out of the far-away past, but still strong enough to come back to him vividly as he recalled the expression that had been on Dick's face.

It was peculiar how a boy of that age got a feeling about a particular horse. It was something you couldn't quite account for—like a man falling in love with a woman. You didn't ever know why it happened. A man could be around all kinds of woman and never be attracted to any of them, and then, bingo! it happened all of a sudden. Nobody ever knew why.

Maybe it was the same way, Pat got to thinking, with Dock and that black colt of Crane's. There were plenty of horses and colts on the Lazy Mare ranch. The boy had his pick of riding stock. And if he wanted a colt of his own to raise all he had to do was ask for it.

Still, it had been wrong for him to slip over there without telling his father. That was what rankled. And Pat had an uneasy feeling there was more to it than appeared on the surface. Frankly, he didn't like Gilbert Crane, and didn't trust him. He didn't know why the new owner of the K Bar was trying to make up to Dock, but it looked to Pat like he was using the black colt as a sort of bribe. Right now, he decided, was as good a time as any to straighten things out.

There was still a light in the K Bar ranch house when he rode up. He dismounted and went to the door and knocked loudly.

Crane came to the door. He was surprised when he saw Pat Stevens, and he stood for a moment as though he would block the doorway, then he nodded and stepped aside, said, "Come in, sheriff."

There was a fire in the big wood stove in the center of the room. Timothy O'Connor was slumped forward in a chair by the stove, half asleep with his chin resting on his chest. Lasher wasn't in sight.

Crane said, "Come in and sit down, sheriff. I'll see if I can rustle up a drink."

Pat said, "Don't bother. I stopped by on business."

"Law business?" Crane glanced at the six-gun on Pat's hip and then at O'Connor. "You oughtn't to mind Tim," he protested. "He's harmless. When he gets drunk he likes to play with guns. That's all."

Pat smiled grimly and asked, "Did he tell you about his run-in with me in town?"

"He came riding home with some wild story about you trying to arrest him. I told him to sleep it off."

The sound of their voices aroused O'Connor from his drunken stupor. He lifted his head and gazed at Pat through bleary eyes. "I ain't skeered of no law," he stated thickly. "Gimme back my gun an' I'll shoot it out with you."

Crane said, "Shut up, Tim. Lasher isn't here," he went on to Pat in an unnaturally loud voice, directing his words more at Tim than at Pat. "If Lasher was here he'd take care of things."

PAT CONSIDERED this statement gravely. "You mean Lasher sorta acts nursemaid for O'Connor when he's drunk like this?"

"That's it," Crane agreed quickly. "You just sit back and take it easy, Tim. I don't think Sheriff Stevens aims to arrest you this time." He turned an inquiring look toward Pat.

"Nope." Pat shook his head. "This is between you an' me, Crane. I'm thinkin' about buyin' some hawses."

Crane wrinkled his broad forehead. "I've only got my breeding stock. I won't be ready to start selling for a couple of years."

"You got me int'rested," Pat told him, "in what you said about crossbreedin' Morgans for saddle stuff. Like that black colt, f'rinstance."

"The one I gave your son?"

"The one Dock picked out an' thought he wanted," Pat corrected him mildly. "Out of a Mexican mare by a Morgan stud, didn't you say?"

"That's right. The boy showed real appreciation of horseflesh when he picked that particular colt, Stevens. I'm glad you've decided to let Dock have him."

"What's yore price?"

"For the black colt?"

"Yeh."

Gilbert Crane shook his head and said stiffly, "That colt isn't for sale, Stevens. As far as I'm concerned he already belongs to Dock."

"You heard me tell him this afternoon that he couldn't have the colt," Pat rumbled.

"That isn't fair. It pleased me to give it to him."

"It didn't please me, Crane."

Crane shrugged his shoulders and avoided Pat's angry eyes. "It doesn't seem very neighborly."

"I'll take it neighborly if you'll sell me the colt."

Crane drew in a long breath. "You don't understand. That colt isn't for *sale*. I'm not ready to start selling any of my stuff. I'm just getting started here."

Pat asked, "Can you afford to refuse a hundred dollars?"

Crane looked startled. That was a big price for a full-grown horse—three or four times what the black colt was worth. His mouth tightened suddenly. "The colt's not for sale. Tell Dock he can come and get him any time he likes."

Timothy O'Connor tottered to his feet, glaring balefully at Pat Stevens. "Gonna git me 'nother gun," he announced thickly. "Gonna git me a gun an' blasht yore guts tuh hell—an'—gone."

"Get on back to bed," Crane ordered sharply. "Shut up your drooling."

"But you tol' me I could," O'Connor said plaintively. "You promished me. You an' the jedge. You tol' me jesh as plain ash day that—"

CRANE roared, "Shut up and get out." He strode forward and got behind Timothy, rushed the tottering old fellow out through a door into the rear of the house. He returned, shaking his head anxiously. "I don't know what to do with him, sheriff. He's a wonderful hand with horses and I thought if I brought him out to a ranch he might straighten up and stop drinking. I guess he used to be quite a gunman in his younger days, and now when he gets a few drinks he thinks he still is."

"You brought him from Denver, huh?"

Crane nodded. "He used to work for me years ago, and when I found him there, down and out, I thought I'd be doing him a favor by giving him a job." He sighed and shook his head.

Pat said, "Two hundred."

"Look here, Stevens. You're making it mighty hard on me. You know the colt isn't worth anything near that."

"It is to me—if my boy wants him."

"But I've already given him to Dock."

"No you haven't. If there's any givin' done, I'll do it." Pat's face was grim and set.

Crane shrugged and said, "I'm sorry you feel that way. But if you're dead-set on buying the colt I'll make the price right. Forty dollars?"

Pat said, "I take that as bein' right friendly, Crane." He got out his wallet and began counting out the money.

"I want to be friendly," Crane said smoothly. "I don't want to start out in Powder Valley with any hard feelings." He looked inquiringly at Pat's money. "You want to take the colt with you tonight?"

"No need of that. I'll let Dock ride over for him tomorrow." Pat passed the forty dollars over. "And keep that old coot out of my hair, Crane. I'll lock him up next time he's in town drunk an' throwin' lead around."

"I won't blame you any." Crane accompanied the sheriff to the door and held out his hand. "I hope this doesn't mean that Dock won't keep on dropping in to see me. He's a mighty fine boy, Stevens."

Pat said, "I don't mind him bein' neighborly." He went out without shaking hands. He had a feeling that he had acted foolishly, but he wasn't sorry. Crane had been entire-

ly too eager to give the colt to Dock, though Pat couldn't for the life of him figure out why Crane was so anxious to make friends with the boy. It would have been different if Crane had been angling after his friendship. A newcomer in the Valley might very well want to make friends with the sheriff, but Crane had made it clear that he didn't care whether Pat liked him or not. It didn't make sense any way you looked at it.

THE BIG Lazy Mare ranch house was blazing with light when Pat approached it an hour later. It gave him a good feeling to see it like that, though he felt a tinge of remorse also, for he knew it indicated that Sally was worried about him. She always stayed up and kept all the lamps burning when Pat was out late and she had cause to be worried about him.

It was funny about Sally. Pat couldn't fool her at all. She could always tell when something was bothering him. That little chance meeting in town that afternoon had been enough to start her worrying. When he didn't even know himself what was at the bottom of it.

Pat rode down to the barn and unsaddled his horse before going to the house. He was beginning to feel a little foolish about the way he'd acted that afternoon and evening. Maybe he was making a lot out of nothing. He didn't have any proof of the vague suspicions that were beginning to form in his mind. There wasn't anything really to go on. People had a right to come to Powder Valley if they wanted to. You really couldn't blame a man like Judge Prink for telling his friends about the Valley after he'd discovered it.

Pat was in pretty good spirits when he went up to the house and opened the front door into the long cheerful living room. He grinned at Sally when she jumped up from her chair in front of the fire and whirled on him with a startled look.

She said, "Oh! It's you, Pat?" as though she were disappointed, as though she had sort of hoped it would be someone else. She came toward him swiftly. "I didn't hear you ride in. I've been so worried."

He put his arms about her and laughed down into her bright blond hair. "Nothin' to worry about. I'd have been home sooner but I wasted some time fixin' things up for Dock."

"Oh, Pat. I'm so glad." She swayed back against his arms and looked up at him with blue eyes that were misty with tears. "I've been terribly worried about him—after what you told me in town about sending him home from the K Bar."

"I never thought about how hard he'd take it," Pat confessed. He bent down and kissed Sally and then released her with a little shove. "I bought that colt for him tonight from Mr. Crane at the K Bar. I reckon he'll know from here on out that he can ask his daddy when he gets to wantin' something like he wanted that black hawse."

"That's wonderful." Sally smiled happily. "Some day he'll learn he's got the best father in the world."

"An' the purtiest mama," Pat told her. "How's the coffee pot?"

"I think it'll still be warm. I left it on the back of the stove." Sally started for the kitchen. "How about a sandwich? I had some steaks left over."

"That'll taste mighty good after a dinner at the Jewel Hotel." Pat stripped off his jacket and went to the fireplace to warm himself.

Sally brought a bright red and white cloth and spread it over a low table by the fire, humming happily to herself. As she went back into the kitchen, she asked over her shoulder, "Do you know whether Dock had any supper?"

Pat frowned at her and shook his head. "How'd *I* know? I just got back from town."

Sally turned slowly in the doorway. All the happiness went out of her face. "But I thought—you said that he— Didn't he come home with you, Pat?"

"Come home with me?" Pat went

toward her swiftly when he saw the look of panic spreading over her features. "What're you talkin' about, hon? Did he go into town?"

SALLY slowly waggled her head from side to side. She tried to speak, then moistened her lips and formed the words carefully. "I thought he was out at the corral putting up the horses now."

Pat caught both her arms and asked hoarsely, "What do you mean? I ain't seen Dock. Not since noon. I stopped by and bought the colt, shore. Where is Dock?"

She whispered in a stricken voice, "I don't know, Pat. He wasn't here when I got back from Dutch Springs. There was a note in his room. He said he was going off where people wouldn't treat him like a little boy. Oh, Pat! Where is he?"

"I dunno," Pat said huskily. He drew his wife closer, stared over her head at the wall.

"He's so little to go off alone. You've got to find him and bring him back, Pat. I thought maybe he'd gone over to the K Bar. Then, when you came home and said you'd been there and had fixed everything up, I just supposed you meant you'd found him there."

Pat put Sally aside gently. He said, "I'll get Ezra to start trailin' him. Don't worry, honey. You know Ezra. He can follow a puma's trail over solid rock. We'll find out what hawse Dock rode—"

"Ezra's already trying to trail him," Sally told her husband in a dead voice. "He went out as soon as I told him. And that's been hours ago. You know Ezra can't trail a horse at night in the dark."

"I've seen him do it," Pat told her grimly. "He don't have to see. It's instinct. Don't worry none. Ezra'll bring him back for shore."

Sally wiped away the tears in her eyes. "I know it's foolish to worry. Dock is old enough to take care of himself. He'll probably ride out to one of the line camps and then come home in a day or so. Nothing can happen to him in Powder Valley."

"Shore there can't," Pat encouraged her heavily. "Dock's been ridin' the range since he was eight years old. But I shore don't see what possessed the young 'un to traipse off like that."

Sally went past him into the kitchen to slice bread and make a thick steak sandwich. With her face averted, she asked quietly, "Were you terribly harsh with him at the K Bar this noon?"

"I don't think so, Sally." Pat spoke honestly. "I was a mite put out, but shucks, I've bawled him out lots worse'n that. An' he'd done wrong, slippin' off like that away from his work. He knew it was wrong."

Sally said quickly, "I'm not blaming you, Pat. No matter what happens. No boy ever had a better father. But—" She bit her under lip and two tears rolled down her cheeks and fell onto the slice of bread she was buttering.

Pat started toward her. He whirled back into the living room at the sound of the door opening. Sally dropped her knife and ran to his side.

Both of them stood there and watched Ezra come in. Dejection was written on his scarred features. His one eye looked at them mournfully as he slowly dragged off his hat.

"I reckon mebby I've lost the knack," he said, his voice husky with shame. "I lost Dock's trail south about five miles. Been makin' circles tryin' to pick it up again, but I reckon I'll hafta wait till mornin'."

Pat said, "Shore. We'll pick it up in the mornin'." He caught hold of Sally' hand and pressed it hard, and his voice was very gentle as he told her, "Make an extra sandwich for Ezra, honey."

CHAPTER X

IT WASN'T more than half an hour after Pat Stevens left the K Bar ranch when Gut-Luck Lasher came stamping into the house. Crane turned on him angrily as soon

as he walked in, and demanded, "Where've you been all evening?"

"Out around." Lasher made a nonchalant gesture. His lean face held a look of suppressed excitement and he gave the impression of being very well satisfied with himself as he strolled forward to the stove.

"That's fine," said Crane with cutting sarcasm. "Out around, eh? Just when you should have been here tending to business."

Lasher shrugged his shoulders. "Mebby I was tendin' to bizniss."

"Monkey business," Crane snorted angrily. "The sheriff was here not more than half an hour ago."

"That so?" Lasher didn't seem perturbed. He got out a sack of tobacco and a book of cigarette papers, began rolling a cigarette.

"And you were out somewhere just when you should have been here. Pat Stevens walked right into the trap but you weren't here to spring it." Crane's voice was thick with frustration and rage.

"Ain't that too bad?" Lasher licked his cigarette and crimped one end between strong fingers.

"It may be weeks before we get another set-up like tonight. He had a run-in with Tim in town—just like we'd planned. He took Tim's gun off him and sent him home drunk. A whole saloonful of men saw and heard the whole thing. Then he came riding out here with a gun on his hip. And Tim was drunk enough to be wringy. If you'd been here where you belonged you could have gunned him down and I'd have killed Tim. No one would ever know but what Stevens had come here to arrest Tim and got shot by him. There'd only have been you and me to tell the story—just like the judge planned it out in Denver."

Gut-Luck shrugged his broad shoulders. "I reckon there'll be other times."

"Not near so perfect. We'll have to work it all up again now. Like the judge told us, we've got to have it so folks will believe us when we say Tim did the shooting. Like as not Stevens won't come back here to the ranch again with a gun on."

"I wouldn't worry too much about that." Lasher grinned at his employer. "Mebby I've been busy too."

"Chasing after some rancher's daughter?"

"Nope." Lasher blew out a puff of blue smoke. He retained his irritating calm. "I met up with the Stevens boy in the east pasture just a little after dark."

"What was Dock doing out there at night?"

"Runnin' away from home," Gut-Luck Lasher told him laconically.

Crane's jaw dropped. "Running away?"

"Yep. Headed fer Mexico. That's what he tol' me. Figgers he's growed up an' don't have to take orders from his sheriffin' daddy no more. But he was worried about that one-eyed galoot trailin' him an' bringin' him back home." Lasher paused to frown down at the glowing tip of his cigarette.

"FELLOW they call Ezra," Crane nodded. "I've heard he's better than any Indian on a cold trail. What of it? We don't care. It just works in good with our plans." He smiled broadly. "It'll make the boy's mama mad at Pat for driving him away from home. She'll remember that after Pat's dead and the boy turns to me more and more. Judge Prink is smart, all right. Quickest way to a widow woman's heart is through her boy."

"But I don't reckon Ezra'll foller *this* trail," Lasher put in casually.

"Why not? They say he can smell one out."

"I fixed that," Lasher told him triumphantly. "Dock an' me gave him somethin' to smell over for a good long time. We did a heap of circlin' with Dock's hawse, an' then I took the boy up behind me an' turned his hawse loose. I carried him up in the hills to that ol' shack on Beaver Crik where I'm bettin Ezra nor nobody else don't find him."

Crane shook his head in perplexity. "What'd you do that for?"

"Seemed like a good idee. I knowed you were out to worry Pat Stevens any way you can. Don't you want to get him riled up so's he'll come over here an' jump me with his guns on?"

"You fool," moaned Crane. "You dod-blasted fool! You've ruined everything. We don't want Stevens to come gunning for *you*. We want him to come after Timothy—or have people *think* he came after Tim. Because we're going to tell it that Tim killed him—after you do the job—and after we've got rid of Tim so he can't deny it."

"You don't need to get so all-fired tough," Lasher muttered sullenly. "I thought it'd be a good idee to help the kid hide out."

"But when he does go home he'll tell about you helping him," Crane pointed out angrily. "That'll bring Pat Stevens helling it over here after *you* instead of Tim. You'll have to kill him and nobody will ever believe us if we try to lay it onto Tim."

"I never thought about that," Lasher admitted uncomfortably.

"You didn't think."

"Mebby I better fix the kid so he can't never tell it was me that he'ped him. I can ride out to that shack tonight—"

"No," said Crane angrily. "That would make it worse. I plan on Dock being my leverage to get in with the widow after Pat's out of the way." He got up and reached for his coat. "Saddle me up a horse," he ordered. "I'll ride in and talk to the judge right now. Maybe he'll be able to figure a way for us to get out of the damn-fool mess you've got us into."

SAM SLOAN was having a final nightcap at the bar in the Jewel Hotel when he saw Gilbert Crane come in. The poker game had broken up, with Windy Rivers a small winner, and the gambler was down at the end of the bar also having a drink before he turned in, and there were a couple of other drinkers between Sam and Windy.

Sam noticed that Crane looked excited and worried as he came in. Sam paid particular attention to the new owner of the K Bar because of the things Pat had said to him that night: talking about all the strangers being in town all at once—about them being from Denver and mostly friends of Judge Prink's asking him if Windy Rivers was a friend of the judge's too, and all that stuff.

Sam Sloan didn't know what any of it was about, but he knew Pat Stevens had a mighty good reason for asking him to keep his eyes open around town like he had.

So Sam fiddled with his drink and moved down a little closer when Crane went straight to Windy and asked him something in a low voice—just like he knew Windy, it looked like to Sam.

He couldn't hear the question, but he did hear Windy's curt reply. "Upstairs."

Crane didn't say anything else. He drew back from Windy and looked around as though he had just recollected something—to see if anyone had noticed him. He acted relieved when he saw that no one seemed to be paying any attention, and he sauntered out into the lobby and upstairs.

Sam finished his drink and strolled over after him. Crane was just disappearing out of sight at the top of the stairs when Sam started up.

The upper hallway was deserted when he reached it. Sam made his steps as soundless as possible, tiptoeing down the hall until he came to a room with light shining out under the door and the faint sound of voices coming from inside.

It was number 14. He knew it was the room occupied by Judge Prink—and he knew that Pat had guessed right. There was some connection between all these newcomers in Dutch Springs and Judge Prink.

Crane had gone right to Windy Rivers when he entered the hotel, and it was evident that he'd asked the judge's whereabouts and Windy had told him the judge was in his room.

Sam hesitated, and then put his

head against the thin upper panel of the door and listened intently. He heard Gilbert Crane saying:

"So the damned fool has got us in a jam right when things were beginning to work the way you planned. If he'd left the boy alone—"

Sam heard footsteps on the stairway behind him. He moved away stealthily and unlocked his room, one door down and across the hall.

He stepped inside and peered out as the footsteps reached the top of the stairs.

It was Windy Rivers.

The gambler came straight down the hallway and stopped outside number 14. He rapped lightly and then turned the knob and went inside.

EXCITEMENT gripped Sam Sloan. He wondered what Pat would want him to do in a case like this. It looked like an important pow-wow was going on behind the closed door of number 14. Pat had asked him to keep his eyes open. He hadn't said anything about eavesdropping, but Sam felt that he'd give a pretty penny to know what was being said inside.

He took a chance and tiptoed across the hall again. But this time he could catch only a low confused murmur from inside the room. He couldn't distinguish any words, and guessed it was the soft-voiced judge talking. He kept on listening and was finally rewarded by hearing Crane say:

"Might work that way. If I can get Tim drunk enough—" Then the judge's soft voice cut in again, and Sam heard the warning sound of a chair being scraped back on the bare floor. He ducked back into his room across the hall and lit his lamp. He heard the door of number 14 open, and Crane's bootheels going down the hall to the stairs, and a little later he heard Windy come out and go into his own room.

Sam undressed thoughtfully and went to bed. He had to ride the Express route back south in the morning. There was hardly time to get out to the Lazy Mare to tell Pat what he'd seen and heard. And it wasn't much anyhow. If Pat hadn't said what he did that evening, Sam wouldn't have thought anything about it.

GUT-LUCK was still waiting up at the K Bar when Crane got back after midnight. The gunman was drinking whisky out of a tin cup and he'd gotten himself into an ugly mood. He glared at the horse trader when Crane came in, and growled, "Look here. I been thinkin'—"

"Let's let the judge do the thinking," Crane interrupted him. He stripped off his gloves and stuffed them in a pocket, then poured himself a drink. "The judge is smart. He saw right away how to turn this thing about the boy around so it would work out just right."

"How?"

Crane finished his drink before replying. Then he reminded Gut-Luck: "You know your end of it is finished after you gun Pat Stevens. That's all you're here for."

"Shore. I know that."

"And I've got to stay and make up to the widow. So it don't matter whether the boy keeps on liking you or not."

"All right. So—?"

"So you and Tim take a ride out to the shack tomorrow evening. On the way out you talk to Tim about kidnaping the boy and holding him for ransom. With a few drinks under his belt, and the way he already hates Sheriff Stevens, Tim will like the idea." Crane paused to take another drink.

"You want Tim an' me to hide him out for ransom?"

"Not you and Tim if you can help it," Crane directed him. "No use you getting mixed up in it if you can keep clear. Take an extra horse along for Dock and tell him Tim is going to help him get started out for Mexico. Then you leave them and come back. Soon as you're gone, Tim can go ahead and kidnap the boy, and chances are Dock won't con-

nect you with it at all. Then we'll fix it in a day or two for me to find the boy and turn him loose to go home. He'll tell his daddy about Tim kidnaping him and chances are he won't mention you in it at all. Then Stevens will come helling over here to get Tim—and you'll handle him like we planned. When I tell my story about Tim getting in the first shot and me killing Tim right afterward, everybody will believe it."

"Sounds all right," Lasher muttered. "But it's mighty damned mixed up jest for a simple shootin'. I never worked this way before."

"You never had Judge Prink to figure things out for you, that's why. The only danger is that Dock might tell his mama about you coming out with Tim and give people the idea you were mixed up in it too. So the judge wants you to pull up stakes as soon as Stevens is taken care of. He'll fix up where you're to go."

Lasher shrugged and poured more whisky into his tin cup. "It's all right with me. All I want is my cut when it's all over."

"You'll get that—and it'll be a big one or I miss my guess." Crane lifted his cup in a salute and said, "Here's to Judge Prink," and they both drank deeply.

CHAPTER XI

PAT STEVENS came awake abruptly and fully half an hour before the first light of dawn. He started to turn back the covers cautiously, planning on how he could get out of bed and the bedroom without wakening Sally, when he suddenly realized that he was alone in the big four-poster bed.

He threw back the covers with a snort of disgust and reached for his pants. When he opened the bedroom door the smell of coffee and frying bacon came to him from the kitchen. Sally turned from the stove to smile at him wanly when he came in.

He said sternly, "You should of kept right on sleeping, honey. I told you last night I'd fix breakfast for Ezra an' me."

"I haven't been asleep," Sally admitted. "I just couldn't keep on lying there, Pat. I had to do something."

She looked young and fragile in a big woolen bathrobe with her hair combed straight down and tied back from her face with a pink ribbon. Pat put his arms about her and held her tight for a moment and said gruffly, "You got to quit worryin'. Ezra an' I'll be on Dock's trail soon as it's daylight. We'll have him back here before night."

"I know." Sally pushed him away and turned back to the stove. "You'd better get washed up because I'm going to start frying your eggs."

Pat stared to say, "I'll call Ezra," but the back door opened just then and the big one-eyed man came in. He scowled when he saw Pat, and growled, "It's time you was gettin' up. I got two hawses saddled an' it'll be daylight 'fore we can get breakfast eat."

Pat said, "I suppose you didn't sleep either. You're as bad as Sally. Both of you act like Dock was the first boy that ever tried to run away from home."

"I reckon you ain't even int'rested," Ezra returned sarcastically, glancing at the two guns on Pat's hips. "You figgerin' on shootin' it out with Dock when we ketch up with him?"

"Yes, Pat," Sally put in with her back turned. "I wondered why you were wearing your guns this morning. You don't plan to arrest Dock, do you?"

Pat said, "These guns haven't got anything to do with Dock. I'm wearin' them from now on." He went out the back door to the wash basins on a wooden bench against the rear of the house.

When he re-entered the kitchen, Ezra was already seated at the table wolfing down a big plate of bacon and eggs and hot biscuits. Pat cleared his throat loudly and sat down opposite him. He caught hold of Sally's hand and held it for a moment when she set his breakfast

down. She told him, "Don't worry about me. I think I'll be able to get some sleep as soon as you an' Ezra are actually on the trail. Just promise me one thing, Pat."

"What is it?"

"That you won't come back without Dock. Please. I don't think I'd be able to stand it if I saw you riding up without him. As long as you don't come back I'll know you're still on his trail."

HE AND Ezra finished their breakfast in silence. Pat kissed Sally and went out to the two horses which Ezra had saddled. It wasn't yet daylight when they rode away from the ranch, but Ezra reminded him that it would be by the time they reached the place where he had lost the boy's trail the preceding night.

And Ezra was right. By the time they reached the fence marking the south boundary of the Lazy Mare ranch the first streaks of dawn were already in the sky. Pat swung off his horse to open the wire gate, and as Ezra rode through the opening they heard a horse nickering eagerly from a little way down the fence line.

They both turned to listen, and heard a horse trotting toward them jerkily, emerging as a vague shape from the semi-darkness, and then revealed as a saddled horse without a rider, holding its head high and trotting jerkily as the trailing bridle reins were caught again and again under nervous forefeet.

Ezra began swearing in a low monotone and Pat's face became grimly set when they recognized the riderless horse. It was Dock's favorite. A stocky pinto. The horse he had ridden away from home twelve hours before.

Pat closed the gate slowly. He stood there like a statue while the pinto slowed to a walk and then came up to nuzzle him confidently. He tangled his fingers in the pony's mane and demanded huskily, "Where's Dock? What happened, boy?"

The pinto tossed his head and snorted loudly. Ezra had slid off his horse and he came over to examine the animal.

"He ain't a mite hot," he pointed out to Pat. "That means he ain't traveled far. More'n likely he's been waitin' around the gate here most of the night for somebody to let him in."

Pat Stevens suddenly began to look old and sick. For the first time in his life he was up against something he didn't know how to handle. He asked brokenly, "What coulda happened, Ezra? If he threw Dock he wouldn't run off an' leave him. You know that. And he was trained to stand ground-tied."

Ezra's one eye gleamed queerly in the early morning light. He studied the saddle intently, running his hands over the stirrup leathers and latigo strap as though to assure himself they were real. Then he lifted the trailing reins and examined them carefully.

"Looky here." He pointed out a hard knot tied near the end of one of the leather reins. "An' here." He showed Pat the other rein, with the end broken off to make it at least a foot shorter than the knotted one. "Plain enuff what happened," he grunted. "Dock musta tied the reins together an' left 'em looped over the saddle horn when he sent the hawse home. Dock'd know that's the only way he'd come. An' they slipped off the horn an' off his neck sometime in the night. He tramped on 'em an' broke this 'un at the place where it was tied."

"Why?" Pat asked desperately. "Why would Dock knot the reins and send him home? How else would he figure on getting anywhere, except on hawseback?"

Ezra shook his big head. He didn't look at Pat as he rumbled, "Only way I kin see it is somethin' happened to Dock so's he couldn't ride no more. So he made out to tie the reins an' send his pinto home to sort of guide us back to him." He blew his nose loudly between his fingers and wiped it on the sleeve of his shirt.

"Can you back-trail the pinto?" Pat demanded.

"Shore. I trailed him way on past here last night like I tol' you, till I lost his tracks in a bunch of others that was all mixed up. See here." Ezra bent over and lifted the pinto's left front leg, pointed out a small broken place in the rear part of the hoof. "Dock showed that foot to me two or three days ago an' we talked about mebby shoein' him. That broken place makes a clear track that anybody could foller."

"All right." Pat didn't argue with the big red-headed man about it. He'd long ago ceased trying to understand how Ezra accomplished his seeming miracles in following a trail that no ordinary man could see. "What'll we do with the pinto? We can't let him go on home. If Sally saw him come trottin' up with Dock's saddle on his back—" He left the rest of the sentence unsaid.

Ezra nodded agreement. "She'd have a conniption fit," he agreed. "Don't you reckon you'd better lead him along, Pat? If we find Dock it might be we'd need a hawse to bring him back on—for him to ride back." he amended hastily.

Pat shivered at the implication in Ezra's words. He nodded and caught up the pinto's reins. "I'll bring him along."

EZRA was already striding along the fence line with his head hunched forward, his one eye studying a maze of hoofprints in the sandy ground.

"He's been trottin' back an' forth along here in front of the gate like I thought," he announced over his shoulder. "You wait there with him while I spread out an' find his trail where he came up to the fence."

Pat waited with the three horses while Ezra cut away from the fence line and then turned back on a line parallel with it and a couple of hundred yards away.

The big man walked along rapidly and then stopped with a grunt of satisfaction. He looked up and waved to Pat, annoucing, "Here's his trail comin' in from the southwest." He waited until Pat came up to him. "See there." He pointed to the ground and then in a southwesterly direction. "Plain as the nose on yore face. You kin easy see 'twas a hawse movin' jumpy-like to miss steppin' on the reins even if you can't see the track of that busted front hoof."

The tracks he pointed to looked like any other set of hoofprints to Pat's eyes. But he nodded and said tersely, "Let's start ridin' the back-trail."

They set out at a trot with Ezra slightly in the lead. He kept scanning the ground ahead, and kept up a steady pace, with Pat riding beside him and leading Dock's pinto. Neither of them spoke of what they feared they would find at the end of the trail, nor of the sickness that was inside them. In all their imaginings, neither of them could figure out what had happened to Dock to cause him to tie his reins and send his pony back. If he had been thrown and hurt so badly that he couldn't ride, it wasn't likely he'd have been able to loop the reins over the saddle horn. It just didn't make sense, and they both tried to avoid thinking ahead.

When they had ridden in silence as long as Ezra could endure it, he told Pat gruffly, "The way these here tracks are headin' will take us somewheres a couple of miles west of where I lost the trail las' night."

"How old is the trail?" Pat asked through tight lips.

"Four—five hours old mebby. Looks like the pinto musta jest about follered me back after I rode in last night. If I'd stayed out a little longer I mighta seen him then."

"It wouldn't have done any good," Pat told him sharply. "You couldn't have followed the back-trail at night."

Ezra muttered, "I follered it from the ranch easy enuff." He sat erect in the saddle, scanning the landscape ahead and frowning. "I don't savvy this. Them tracks made a bee-line south from the ranch to where I lost 'em. Now, this set follers straight

back to the Lazy Mare only from a place more'n two miles west of the other trail. Why'd Dock turn off west an' waste time when he musta knowed I'd take out on his trail soon as we found out he'd left?"

Pat said savagely, "It's no use guessing what a boy might do. Are we still on the trail?"

"Shore. Why else d'yuh think we'd be ridin' along?" Ezra asked indignantly. He bent forward and began to slow up his horse. "Hol' it, though." He pulled up his horse abruptly and slid out of the saddle. He stood motionless a moment, frowning down at the ground, and then carefully began to swing around in a wide circle, bent forward from the waist so his one eye was not more than two feet away from his toes.

PAT sat in the saddle and watched him and tried to roll a cigarette. His shaky fingers tore two papers before he got one rolled. Ezra had completed a wide circle and was angling in toward the center of it. He seemed to be sniffing his way like a dog, and Pat watched him, fascinated.

When Ezra straightened up and came toward him, his scarred face gave no clue to the story he had read there in the maze of hoofprints on the ground.

He came up beside Pat's horse and began talking slowly, as though he didn't want to believe what he was saying, but it was something that had to be said:

"Here's where the pinto started out from with an empty saddle, Pat. Somethin' funny happened here. There ain't a single sign of a footprint, but I'll swear the pinto had a rider up when he got this far—an' didn't have a rider when he took out from here towards the Lazy Mare."

He paused to gulp in a long breath. "There was another rider here at the same time las' night. His hawse an' the pinto did a lot of circlin' right here. His hawse went off loaded double, Pat."

He stopped to give Pat a chance to absorb his words, to figure out for himself what they might mean.

Pat said in a dead voice, "Another hawse went off from here loaded double?"

"Tha's what the tracks say, Pat. Looks like the other hawse was follerin' the pinto from where I lost the trail las' night. Cuttin' back an' forth behind the pinto on purpose to cover up the tracks so's they couldn't be follered. Then—right here—Dock unloaded onto the other hawse."

"Without stepping down to the ground?" Pat put in hoarsely.

"Tha's right." Ezra didn't look up at his old friend's face. He knew what Pat was thinking. There was only one thing to think—that Dock had been *lifted* out of the pinto's saddle. That his body had been transferred to another horse and the pinto sent on home.

"I don't get it a-tall," Ezra went on dubiously. "If Dock was hurt, how could he ride this far? Who'd take him onto his hawse if he was hurt an' then not bring him home, or come to tell us about it? An' there's the K Bar ranch not more'n a mile away down yonder. If 'twas somebody that found Dock hurt out here, he'd shorely carry him right to the K Bar—but the double-loaded hawse took off south, *away* from the K Bar. An' there ain't no other ranches south of here. Not for more'n fifty miles."

"Can you follow that other trail?"

"A little ways anyhow." Ezra stared thoughtfully southward. "But it ain't more'n two or three miles till we hit into the rocky country where I'll lose it shore as hell. Yuh see," he went on apologetically, "I don't know, personal, the hawse that's carryin' that double load. Not like I know the pinto's tracks."

"Let's try it," Pat said angrily. "Follow the trail as far as you can."

"You betcha." Ezra clambered into the saddle and started slowly southward. He kept his horse at a walk, leaning forward to watch the ground carefully, and it took them more than an hour to reach the series of low limestone hills where he had prophesied he'd lose the trail.

HE STOPPED and shook his head lugubriously when they got that far. "'Tain't no use," he announced helplessly. "I don't believe no man could foller a hawse over these hills, Pat. It's jest plumb guessin' from here on out."

Pat shaded his eyes to stare ahead. They were on the upper slope of Powder Valley. From this point onward the terrain rose sharply toward towering peaks far in the distance. Ahead were sharp ridges and deep gullies where an army of men might hide for weeks from searching parties.

"All right," said Pat grimly. "We'll have to start guessing. We'll spread out—about half a mile apart. We promised Sally we wouldn't come back without him," he added sharply.

Ezra said, "We'll find him, with a faith he didn't feel, and the two men started out on their seemingly hopeless task.

As the sun rose high at noon and then began to arc downward, the hopelessness of the search became more and more evident. In the long hours that passed they had succeeded in covering only a very small portion of the wide range that lay stretched out in front of them. And during that time Ezra did not once come upon another trace of the tracks he had followed up to the edge of the rocky hills. The double-loaded horse had been swallowed up in the vast expanse of broken wasteland, and there was no way to judge which direction it might have gone.

The autumn sun was hovering just above the western horizon when Pat Stevens cut across to intercept Ezra and to announce hopelessly, "We might as well admit we're whipped, an' quit." His face was grim and hard, showing the strain of long hours of searching during which the two men had been without food and water.

"I reckon yore right," Ezra agreed gruffly. They were at the north end of the line of rocky hills, a few miles west of the point where Ezra had lost the trail that morning. "Thing to do is tuh get word out tuhnight," he told Pat earnestly. "Turn out every man that kin ride tomorrow. It was a fool trick for us two to try it ourselves today."

Pat admitted that Ezra was right. The same conviction had been growing in his mind all afternoon, but he had fought against it, forcing himself to go on because he didn't know how he could ride home and face Sally.

"You'd best go back to the ranch," Ezra said as they turned their horses away from the search. "I'll stop at the K Bar for a drink an' somethin' to eat. Then I'll ride into town an' pass the word out that we need help."

Pat agreed on that plan and they altered their course to head down toward the K Bar.

The sun slid below the horizon and dusk began to close down as they approached the ranch house. Ezra's big body was hunched forward in the saddle and his eye was half closed in fatigue. They were less than a quarter of a mile from the ranch when he stiffened and gave a little grunt of surprise, staring down at the ground.

He turned his head to see if his companion had noticed anything. But Pat was staring straight ahead, his face gaunt and drawn.

EZRA remained relaxed in the saddle, but he was staring down at the ground keenly now, seeing things that no other man could possibly have seen. He didn't say anything until they reached the ranch house and Gilbert Crane came out in the yard to welcome them. Then he told Pat, "I'll take the hawses down to the trough for a drink while you palaver with Mr. Crane."

Pat swung out of the saddle and nodded curtly to Crane. He said, "I could do with a drink myself."

Crane was staring at the saddled pinto Ezra led off behind Pat's horse. "Isn't that Dock's favorite pony?" he asked as he led Pat to a handpump and handed him a gourd dipper.

Pat grunted, "Yep." He held the dipper while Crane pumped water into it. He took a big swallow and sloshed it around inside his mouth, then swallowed a little.

"We've been riding the hills back there all day looking for Dock," he explained matter-of-factly. "His hawse came back without him last night."

"Couldn't Ezra back-trail him? I've heard he was good at that." Crane pumped another dipperful of cold water.

Pat took a bigger drink, shaking his head. "Ezra lost the back trail an' couldn't pick it up. I'm obliged to you for the water." He handed the dipper back. "An' I'll be obliged if you an' your men will help us hunt Dock tomorrow. We aim to get everybody in Powder Valley out."

"Of course. We'll be glad to. Do you think he's hurt?"

Pat said, "I don't know." He spoke slowly, as though each word hurt. "All we know is his pinto hawse came back without him on it."

He stepped forward to meet Ezra and take the reins of his horse. "Well, I reckon I'll be ridin' on."

Ezra said, "I'm ridin' with you."

"I thought you were going to stay here and eat and then ride to Dutch Springs. I'm sure Crane will feed you—"

"Of course," Crane said quickly, but Ezra shook his head and glared at Pat and said loudly, "I've done changed m' mind. I'm ridin' with you."

PAT KNEW from his tone that he was trying to convey some secret without putting it into words. So he nodded and swung into the saddle, told Crane, "We'll be obliged for your help tomorrow," and rode away with Ezra by his side. As soon as they were out of earshot, he demanded, "Why in tunket—"

"Wait a minute." Ezra held up a big hand and looked back over his shoulder. "I didn't tell you this, but when we was ridin' up to the ranch we come on that hawse's trail again—headed *toward* the K Bar."

"What hawse?"

"The one we trailed away from where we lost Dock's trail, the hawse that carried double away from there. But this hawse weren't carryin' double when he come *back* to the K Bar."

Pat said, "By grab." He started to wheel his horse around.

Ezra caught his rein and kept him going straight ahead, growling, "We're still in sight an' I betcha that Crane feller is watchin'. That very hawse is in the K Bar corral right now," he went on. "I didn't tell you none of this 'cause I figgered you'd go crazy mad an' jump 'em right there about Dock."

"Sure I would. I will. What in hell are you doing ridin' away from there, Ezra? If they've got Dock—"

"But they ain't got him. Not at the ranch leastways. Don't yuh see? That hawse was carryin' *one* when it came back. Whoever was ridin' it carried Dock out somewheres an' come back without him."

"Thats' why I'm going back—"

"No," said Ezra firmly. For the first time in their long association he was assuming leadership because he knew Pat was incapable of reasoning clearly on a subject as close to him as his own son.

"That'd be bad," he argued. "Long as they don't know we *know*, they won't be scared. I figger it this-away," he went on swiftly before Pat could argue with him. "I don' believe Dock was hurt when he changed hawses. Stands to reason he weren't. He was ridin' *ahead* of the other hawse up to that place. That means he was ridin'—not bein' carried or tied in the saddle. Mebby you've done forgot he was runnin' away from home," he added grimly.

Pat drew in a long breath. "Keep on talking."

"Dock's purty smart," Ezra reminded him. "He musta knowed I'd get on the trail of that pinto. So when he met up with a feller on another hawse—a K Bar hawse—him an' this feller figgered out a way to throw me off the trail. An' I'm guessin' they got Dock hid out somewhere's in the hills an'll be ridin' out to him tuhnight."

He turned in the saddle to look back again. "We're outta sight now.

We kin circle back in behind the ranch an' hide an' see what happens. Better to let 'em lead us to Dock than to have a shootin' an' mebby kill the very one that knows where Dock is hid out."

And for the first time in their comradeship Pat was glad to let Ezra take the lead. He agreed, 'I'll play it your way till midnight. If they haven't made a move by then I'll ride down an' start askin' questions."

CHAPTER XII

THERE WEREN'T many people in the hotel dining room the next morning when Sam Sloan came down to breakfast. Judge J. Worthington Prink was one of the few. He had a napkin tucked under his chin and was enjoying a double stack of hotcakes while he nibbled at side orders of fried eggs and ham and hashed brown potatoes.

On a sudden impulse Sam passed up several vacant tables and stopped in front of the judge with his hand on the back of a chair. He drawled, "Good mornin', jedge. I reckon this here seat ain't taken."

The judge mumbled, "Good morning." He pursed his lips and looked around the almost deserted dining room and then back at Sam Sloan. He said, "No. That seat isn't taken."

Sam nodded and seated himself. "Me, I kinda like company fer breakfas'," he confided. "Seems like it makes m' food taste better."

The judge said, "That so?" in a tone that indicated Sam's company at his table wasn't going to increase his enjoyment of breakfast.

Sam said, "Yep," cheerfully, and told the waitress, "Ham an'. With hot biscuits if you got 'em. An' coffee."

The girl smiled and went away.

"Yes siree," said Sam. "It's sorta nice to have somebody from the outside to talk to. A man gits tired of seein' the same ol' faces year in an' year out."

The judge forked in a mouthful of hotcake dripping with butter and sirup, and then crammed in half a fried egg behind it. He began to munch rhythmically while his little beady eyes studied Sam without particular interest.

"Lotsa new faces around Dutch Springs nowadays though," Sam went on "There's that bunch out to the K Bar, an' the new school ma'am an' her uncle. Mostly from Denver, I hear tell. Yo're from Denver too, ain't you, jedge? I reckon you knowed 'em in the city before you come here."

Judge Prink swallowed a big gulp of food and cleared his throat. "Denver is quite a large city. People aren't all neighbors there as they are in Dutch Springs."

"Shore. I know that. But I reckon most of the impawtant people git to know each other. Like that Mr. Crane an' the Deever man."

"I had met Mr. Crane in a business way," the judge admitted. "Mr. Deever was a stranger to me until we became acquainted through Miss Constance when I arranged for her to come to Dutch Springs as the new teacher."

"An' this here Windy Rivers," Sam went on. "I don't reckon none of you woulda knowed *him*. Bein' jest a gamblin' man."

"I," said the judge, "am not a gambling man." He filled his mouth again to indicate that his part of the conversation was ended.

"But I betcha mebby Crane knowed him in Denver," said Sam cheerily. "Crane bein' what I'd figger a sportin' feller. An' you know what I think, jedge?"

Judge Prink reluctantly shook his head.

Sam glanced around the dining room and lowered his voice confidentially. "I figger that Rivers feller is as crooked as a dog's hind laig. I figger he's waitin' out these little games till a big 'un comes along. I've a mind tuh tell Tom Dasher he'd better watch his step playin' stud poker with Windy."

JUDGE PRINK emptied his mouth hastily, becoming bluish in the face as he gulped his food down. In his best legal voice he inquired, "Have you any legal basis for your assumption?"

"Come again?" Sam frowned in bewilderment.

"What reason have you for thinking Rivers is not an honest gambler?"

"Oh. I dunno. Jest a idee I got watchin' him play."

"Have you discovered any irregularities?" the judge asked sternly.

"No-o-o. Not that I kin put a finger on. But I betcha I'm keerect. Stands to reason he wouldn't be wastin' his time here jest to play honest dollar-limit poker."

Judge Prink cleared his throat portentously. "Let me give you some free legal advice, Mr. Sloan. As district judge it's my sworn duty to warn you against making a libelous statement impugning any man's character."

Sam said helplessly, "Them triple-jointed words are "way over m' haid."

"I'm advising you to keep your mouth shut unless you have proof to back up your belief that Rivers is dishonest. He could sue you for libel and slander, Mr. Sloan."

"Is that a fac'?" Sam shook his head wonderingly. "Times has shore changed. Back in my day that'd only call fer shootin'. So you reckon he'd sue me, huh?"

"I advise you not to make the test."

Sam's breakfast order came just then. As he ate it thoughtfully, the judge finished his own enormous breakfast, got up and waddled away with a curt nod for Sam.

Sam Sloan grinned to himself as he went on eating alone. Looked like he had kind of got the judge's goat. There was some sort of funny business going on, all right. The judge had been mighty quick to stick up for Windy Rivers. Sam thought Pat would be interested in hearing about it.

It was noon when Sam thundered up to the lonely little Pony Express station by the side of the road south from Dutch Springs. He leaned forward on the back of his flying horse and shaded his eyes to peer ahead as he neared the station swiftly. Ever since old Jeff Harkness had taken over from Ezra the job of tending the way-station, Sam had been afraid that some day he would come galloping up and there would be no rider mounted on a fresh horse and waiting to grab the mail bags without the loss of an instant. For Jeff was almost at the doddering age and wasn't any too trustworthy, and Sam Sloan had a deep pride in the mail service and in the speedy schedule he helped to maintain.

Today he nodded with satisfaction when he saw that everything was as it should be at the station. There was Bill Livermore in the saddle by the side of the road waiting to make the next lap southward. And old Jeff was standing beside Bill's horse ready to grab the bags and transfer them to Bill's horse behind his light saddle without the loss of more than a few seconds of precious time.

Sam reached behind him and unbuckled the bags when he was a hundred yards away. He swept up with undiminished speed and stopped his horse on a dime, tossing the bags into Jeff's arms. The old man threw them over Bill's horse and tightened two buckles, and Bill put spurs to his mount, leaping away in a burst of speed and a thick cloud of dust.

Sam wearily slid out of the saddle and said, "Hi, old-timer," to Jeff. Jeff was looking at his watch, and his leathery old face beamed with satisfaction as he announced proudly, "We cut nigh onto half a minute off our best record this mawnin'."

Sam said, "That's good. Give my hawse an extra pint of oats an' a good rub-down." He turned away slowly toward the open door of the four-room frame shack with its lean-to kitchen.

HIS SEAMED face broke into a broad grin when he saw Kitty in the doorway waiting for him. When he first took the job after marrying Kitty Lane, this moment of greeting after an overnight absence had been hallowed and wonderful. She was always in the doorway to greet him and Sam always felt a thrill of gratification and happiness when he saw her there.

But lately Kitty hadn't been in the doorway to meet him when he rode in from Dutch Springs. Sam couldn't understand it, and it worried him because he thought maybe it was an indication that she didn't love him any

more. She had been getting that way ever since she learned she was going to be a mother. She sat around and rested a lot, and didn't seem to be near as interested in things as she had been. Yet, she didn't seem to be sick. That's what Sam couldn't understand. She had taken to talking sort of queerly too, about religion and things like that. Sam vaguely realized it had something to do with approaching motherhood, but it worried him just the same.

Now, he got a warm glowy feeling inside him when he saw his attractive wife framed in the doorway just as she had always been during the honeymoon period. The only difference was that she looked lots prettier to Sam. He never could get over the wonder of her prettiness—and him so ugly. He didn't see how any woman could love an ugly sawed-off runt like him, much less the prettiest girl in the state.

She smiled at him just like in the beginning, and held up her lips for his kiss.

Sam put his arm around her and kissed her as though she were something fragile and might break in two if he wasn't mighty careful.

Kitty laughed lightly and pulled off his Stetson to rumple his hair. "That's not very much of a kiss." She linked her arm in his and drew him inside. "I've got dinner waiting. Fried chicken and mashed potatoes."

"You ortn't to've bothered, Kitty," he reproached her. "You'll be all tired out from workin'—an' mebby it ain't good for you."

Kitty said, "Nonsense," and tossed her head. "I'm through being foolish about the baby coming, Sam," she told him quietly. "I've been making myself sick—and it's not fair to you. Sit down while I put dinner on the table.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking," Kitty told her husband after they had finished dinner and he had dried the dishes for her. "I've been letting myself go to pieces, Sam. I'm going to stop. It's perfectly normal for a woman to have a baby. I'm young and strong and it's foolish for me to worry about it."

SAM WAS seated across from her in the small living room loading his short-stemmed pipe. He said mildly, "I ain't blamed you none, Kitty. It's a woman's place to be sick, I reckon, if she wants to."

"That's just it," Kitty told him fiercely. "I haven't been sick. Not really. I've been getting morbid. Thinking about religion too much and things like that."

"That's awright too. I guess religion ain't so bad. In fac', I been figgerin' on mebby it'd be a good idee to fix it so you could drive into Dutch Springs Saturday afternoons an' we'd go to church Sunday mornings. Wouldn't you like that?"

"No," Kitty said quickly. Then she smiled to take away the sting of her blunt refusal. "I don't mean it quite that way. But I've been talking to Myra Jenkins some lately."

"The widder Jenkins?"

"Yes. She's stopped by to talk on her way from town a couple of times. I don't want to get like *her*, Sam. It frightens me. If that's what too much church does to people, I don't want any."

Sam chuckled as he lit his pipe. "No chance of you gettin' like her, I reckon. She allus was sorta queer."

"That's just it, Sam. I didn't realize until I talked to her that I might be getting the same way. I believe in prayer and I want to keep on reading my Bible, but I don't think I'll start going to church. Not if it might make me like Mrs. Jenkins." Kitty shook her head and shuddered.

Sam chuckled again. "What kinda idees has she got now?"

"Some crazy thing about a new religion she's discovered. It's sort of spiritualism, I guess. Or reincarnation, or something like that."

Seeing Sam's blank look, Kitty explained.

"Spiritualism is a belief in the spirits of dead people talking to people on earth. And reincarnation is the belief that dead people come back in other bodies—or in other shapes."

"Like hawses or dawgs?" Sam asked interestedly.

"Yes. Or mockingbirds. She swears,

Sam, that her husband has come back in the form of a mockingbird and he sits outside her window at dawn every morning and sings to her and she tries to understand what he's telling her, and if she can just understand him she'll be able to know *everything.*"

Kitty paused to laugh at the expression on Sam's face. "I *know* it sounds silly. But she *believes* it, Sam. And she's trying to convert me. She stopped by this morning on her way from church," Kitty went on rapidly, lacing and unlacing her fingers in her lap, "and she had some man out in the buggy with her, and she came in and told me in private *he* understands about this new religion and is going to teach her to understand what her dead husband is trying to say through the mockingbird, and she wanted me to slip away this afternoon and come over to her ranch to take a lesson too."

Sam shook his head disbelievingly. "Who's the feller that's gonna tell her what the mockin'bird's sayin'?"

"I don't know. Some stranger from Denver. She didn't tell me his name and I didn't bother to look at him."

"I betcha it's that schoolma'am's uncle," said Sam excitedly. "Yessir. From Denver, huh? They do say he's mighty chummy with the Lord."

"It's sacrilege," Kitty said angrily. "And it made me mad when she thought I'd come and listen to any such thing. Have I been acting so terribly funny?" she wailed. "Do you think I'm going to get like her, Sam?"

HE THREW back his head and laughed loudly at the frightened expression on Kitty's pretty face. "I wouldn't worry none about it, honey. You jest keep right on bein' yore own sweet self."

"That's what made me decide to be different," Kitty told him honestly. "I've been lying around feeling sorry for myself and fretting, and I'm going to stop it. I've got the best husband in the world and I'm happy here for the first time in my life and I'm *not* going to let anything spoil it."

Sam tried to say something but he had such a lump in his throat that he couldn't get any words out. He got up to get a drink of water and wash the lump down, and as he passed the open front door he paused to peer out down the road toward Dutch Springs.

He stood there for a moment, and then chuckled and said over his shoulder, "There comes the livery rig, all shined up an' clean. Betcha that's the banker feller out sparkin' the new schoolteacher.

"By golly," he added quickly, "they're a-turnin' in here, Kitty. Yessir. It's shore enuff Rudd Fleming all dressed up fit to kill. An' Miss Dawson looks right sweet an' purty too." He stepped out of the doorway to greet the visitors as the livery buggy pulled up in front of the express station.

CHAPTER XIII

RUDD FLEMING was dressed in a suit of black broadcloth which had become too small for him during the four years it had lain in his trunk. The coat constricted his shoulders and the trousers were tight about his hips and thighs. The stiff collar, too, was irksome to his neck, accustomed to the freedom of open-throated flannel shirts, and he felt uncomfortably dressed up even though he had decided against a derby in favor of the white Steton which he habitually wore.

But when he stopped for Connie at Mrs. Leroy's just after Sunday dinner, he was glad that he had dressed carefully. For she looked as though she had just stepped out of a New York or Paris dress shop in a close-fitting woolen suit of dark green with an absurd little hat worn on the back of her head and black lace stockings with high-heeled shoes.

He had forgotten that a woman could look like that, and his heart pounded like a college boy's as he leaped down to help her into the buggy. He laughingly apologized for the incongruity of his western hat, but Connie told him she liked it and thought it was quite proper for a buggy ride in Powder Valley.

They started out that way, with laughter and mutual understanding between them; and they laughed more and came to understand each other better while the livery team trotted briskly through the cool autumnal sunlight and they talked of many things.

Connie told him a little about herself, mixing a little truth with a lot of falsehood, hinting at a background of wealthy parents and eastern finishing schools, mentioning a financial debacle that had to do with mining properties, and recent orphanhood that had forced her to accept this teaching position. She gave Rudd Fleming an impression of bravery and self-reliance by touching lightly upon these falsehoods, and by the time they had driven to the Pony Express way-station he knew he was falling in love with her, and the realization pleased him tremendously.

Connie had mentioned her thirst about a mile back, and when they reached the station, Rudd turned in, telling her, "There's a funny old codger lives here. He'll give us a drink and you can meet his wife. She's from Denver also and she seems very happy to be settled in this lonely place married to an Express rider."

Sam Sloan stepped out of the doorway to welcome them as Rudd Fleming pulled up the team. He said, "Howdy, Mr. Fleming. Has the bank took a mortgage on this here station of mine?"

The young banker laughed and stepped down to the ground. "This is purely a pleasure ride, Sam. Miss Constance would like a drink of water. This is Sam Sloan—Miss Dawson."

Sam went to the buggy to hold out a brown hand and shake Connie's heartily. "Mighty glad tuh make yore acquaintance, Miss Dawson. I've heard talk about the new schoolma'am but nobody tol' me you was so danged purty."

Connie laughed and held on to his hand to step down from the buggy. "You'd better be careful," she warned him. "I think your wife is right behind you listening."

SAM TURNED and saw Kitty standing in the doorway. Rudd Fleming was going toward her, but Kitty's eyes were fixed on Connie Dawson's face. They widened, and her features took on a queer look of bewilderment and of half recognition.

Sam said, "Well, I'll be doggoned! Looks like these two gals mebby awready know each other, Mr. Fleming. Them both bein' from Denver an' all."

Rudd stopped near Kitty and took off his hat. He said, "Good afternoon, Mrs. Sloan," and then turned to tell Sam with a smile, "I hardly think Mrs. Sloan and Miss Dawson were acquainted in Denver. You see, well —" He flushed and reached up with his forefinger to loosen the collar that had suddenly started to choke him. "What I mean, Sam, is—well—Miss Dawson is a schoolteacher, you know."

"Of course," said Kitty clearly. "And I was just a dancehall entertainer until you married me, Sam." She held her head high and her narrowed eyes were fixed on Connie's face.

Sam Sloan went toward his wife. He told her stoutly, "Dancehall entertainin' ain't nothin' to be ashamed of. If Mr. Fleming has got a idee you ain't good enuff—"

"No, no," said Rudd Fleming quickly and unhappily. "I didn't mean anything like that, Sam. I've always been one of your wife's admirers. I merely meant that it wasn't likely that she and Miss Dawson had met in Denver. That is—" He was stumbling over his words, as crimson and self-conscious as a schoolboy.

Connie came forward, smiling and self-possessed. She said, "I'm sure your wife was a wonderful entertainer, Mr. Sloan, and if I had gotten out much in Denver I might have met her." Her eyes met Kitty's and implored her not to say anything. She said, "I'm Constance Dawson, Mrs. Sloan. I *hope* you won't hold it against me because I'm just a schoolteacher."

Kitty said, "How do you do—Miss Dawson. Did I hear Mr. Fleming say something about wanting a drink?"

"Please." Connie laughed and linked her arm in Kitty's. "And I wish you'd show me your house. I think it's wonderful the way women make homes out here in the wilderness." The two women went in the front door together.

RUDD FLEMING got out a handkerchief and mopped sweat from his face though the afternoon was quite cool. He said to Sam, "See here. I hope you don't think—that is—I don't want you or your wife to feel—"

Sam laughed and slapped him on the shoulder. "Neither Kitty nor me is thin-skinned about what she did for a livin' before me an' her got married. Right now she's Mrs. Sam Sloan an' nothin' else matters. Come on in an' we'll get that drink."

Inside the lean-to kitchen, Connie closed the door tightly and put her back against it. She said, "Well, Kitty?" and her voice and face were hard.

Kitty turned slowly. Her voice was troubled. "It is you, isn't it, Connie?"

"Yes. Thanks for not giving me away out there—in front of Rudd."

Kitty stood back against the sink. Her eyes were dilated. "What are you doing in Dutch Springs pretending to be a schoolteacher?"

"I'm trying to be decent. It's my chance to get away from singing in saloons the rest of my life. *You* ought to know, Kitty. You did the same thing."

Kitty shook her head. "I didn't fool Sam. He knew all about me when he married me."

"But I can't tell Rudd the truth. You know I can't, Kitty. He's different."

"Different from Sam? Maybe. But he's no better. Sam Sloan is the finest man in Powder Valley, Connie Dawson.

"I heard about Judge Prink being here," Kitty went on slowly. "I thought I ought to tell people the truth about him, but I didn't. When he settled down in Dutch Springs and got appointed district judge I thought maybe he'd changed. I thought I'd wait and see. Why did he bring you here, Connie?"

"Because Powder Valley needed a schoolteacher. I did it for sort of a lark. I thought it'd be fun to pretend to be a schoolteacher. And then I met Rudd Fleming." Connie's voice softened. "Don't blame me too much, Kitty. *You* know the way I lived in Denver. You can't blame me for trying to get away from that."

"Who's the man that came with you pretending to be your uncle?"

Connie hesitated. "It's Dan Deever, Kitty."

"That old hypocrite?" Kitty's nostrils flared. "What are he and the judge cooking up together?"

"Nothing," Connie told her weakly. "Daniel wanted to get away from Denver too. He's changed since you knew him, Kitty. He's really gotten religion instead of just pretending like he used to. He thought he might come here and make a new start—where people didn't know him."

KITTY SHOOK her head. "I don't believe it," she said simply. "Not Dan Deever. He and the judge must be up to some crooked game. And I won't stand for it, Connie. I won't let them get away with anything here in Powder Valley. I'll tell everybody the truth about them."

"And ruin things for me?" Connie cried despairingly.

"I can't help that." Kitty thinned her lips against her teeth. "You don't know me any more, Connie. I live in Powder Valley. These people are my friends. They trust me, even though they know the kind of life I lived before I came here. Do you think I'd let them down?"

"But you're going to let me down."

"You're in it with Judge Prink and Dan Deever."

"In *what?* I swear it isn't what you think, Kitty. They've both changed. They're not up to anything."

Kitty shook her head. "A skunk can't change his smell."

"That's being terribly unfair." Connie was shaking now, and her voice was desperate. "You don't know anything about it."

"I know both of them."

"Give me my chance," Connie implored. "You've got everything. Why should you begrudge me my chance? You're married and safe. You're happy. You're—going to have a baby, aren't you?"

Kitty said "Yes," proudly. She hesitated. "Do you think You're going to marry Rudd Fleming?"

"I will—if he asks me."

"Don't do it," Kitty counseled her. "Don't trick him, Connie. You'll never forgive yourself if you do that. Tell him the truth."

"Then he won't ask me to marry him," Connie cried.

"He will if he loves you. And that's the only way marriage is any good. If he doesn't love you enough to marry you knowing the truth, then you won't be happy anyway."

"Give me a little time," Connie begged. "If he had time to learn to love me first—then maybe it wouldn't matter."

Kitty shook her head. "It's the wrong thing to do, Cconnie."

"How do you know what's right and what's wrong for me? Who are you to pass judgment? *You're* safe and happy."

Kitty said, "You'll hate yourself if he marries you first and then finds out afterward." Her face softened and she went toward the other girl, holding out her hand. "Rudd Fleming is a fine man. Trust him to do what's right. Tell him the truth, Connie, before it's too late."

"Will you let me decide when's the right time to tell him?"

Kitty hesitated. She warned Connie evenly, "Not if I find out Judge Prink and Dan Deever are up to something. But I won't say anything right away." She turned and got some glasses down from a shelf. "We'd better take them a drink."

"You women have been a mighty long time gettin' that water," Sam told them when they came in from the kitchen with brimming glasses.

"We've been telling each other secrets," Connie said brightly. "That is, Mrs. Sloan has."

SAM STOOD in the doorway with his arm about Kitty's waist while they watched the livery buggy drive away. "Looks like Rudd Fleming has got it bad," he chuckled. "D'yuh see how he looked at Miss Dawson? An' the way he he'ped her up into the buggy—like she was made outta glass an' might break if he weren't careful?"

Kitty nodded. She didn't echo his laughter. She seemed queerly withdrawn and her face had a pinched look. She said, "He's nice, isn't he?"

"Fleming?" Sam looked at her in surprise. "You betcha. Fer an Easterner he's plumb awright. Time he was gettin' hitched, though, an' they make a mighty nice-lookin' couple."

Kitty was quiet and moody after their visitors left, and Sam noticed the change in her and was worried.

He asked gruffly, "Did seein' her make you start thinkin' about Denver an' all? Did it sorta make you wish you had purty clothes like that to wear?"

"No," Kitty told him fiercely. "I wouldn't change places with her for anything in the world."

"I jest wondered," Sam said humbly. "I wouldn't blame you none for gettin' to feel that way—stuck out here like we are. We don' *have* to live out here like this," he went on swiftly. "We could move to town if you'd like it. Or all the way into Denver even, mebby. I ain't broke, you know. I still got that there money—"

"No, Sam." Kitty got up and went to him swiftly leaning down to press her soft cheek against his leathery forehead. "I love it like this," she assured him. "Living here alone—with you. I don't need people. I don't need anything. Just this."

Sam said awkwardly, "Yo're plumb wonderful, Kitty. I reckon there never was a man as lucky as me."

She patted his cheek and went back to her rocking chair. "It seems to me this is all there's ever been in life," she mused. "Just loving you and living here. Oh Sam! I feel so sorry for all the women in the world who haven't got husbands like you."

Sam stuffed tobacco in his pipe and looked embarrassed. "I reckon there ain't many women would want

me. None ever did till you came along."

Kitty picked up her crocheting and began to ply her steel hook. There was silence between them. Sam puffed on his pipe and was content.

After a time a frown creased Kitty's brow. Her crochet needle started going slower and slower while she stared thoughtfully across the room. She broke the silence between them by asking:

"What was it you said about the teacher's uncle, Sam?"

"Huh?" He took his pipe out of his mouth and looked at Kitty. "What's that?"

"You were asleep," she accused him.

"Nope. I was sorta dreamin', mebby. Seems like the pipe smoke makes picatures when you set an' jest let it come out easy."

"I asked you about the schoolteacher's uncle."

"Mr Deever? What about him?"

"Remember when I was telling you about Mrs. Jenkins just after dinner? I told you about the mockingbird she thnks is the reincarnation of her husband."

SAM NODDED and chuckled. "Ol' Tod Jenkins! If he had his pick of what shape he'd come back in, 'twouldn't be no mockin'bird, I'll tell you that."

"And I told you she had someone out in her buggy when she stopped by this morning," Kitty went on.

"Feller that was goin' to tell her what ol' Tod sings about so early in the mornin'," Sam chuckled again. "Now that'd be somethin'. I'd shore admire to hear that."

"And you said you supposed it was probably the schoolteacher's uncle," Kitty continued patiently. "Do you remember saying that?"

"Shore. You said it was some feller from Denver. Made me think about Deever—him bein' so stuck on religion an' all."

"Is that the only reason you had for thinking it was Mr. Deever, Sam?"

Sam shrugged. "I guess I did hear in town that Deever'd been makin' up to the widder at church. Don' know how true it is. But there ain't many strange fellers from Denver that'd be giving the widder lessons in some new-fangled religion about dead people turnin' into mockin' birds."

Kitty's frown deepened. She began to ply her needle swiftly again, but her lips tightened and it was evident that her thoughts were far away, and not pleasant.

Before Sam could settle back to the dreamy pleasure of making pictures out of his tobacco smoke, she asked him:

"Would you mind terribly hitching up a team and driving us over to the Jenkins ranch?"

Sam said, "No." But he looked at her curiously.

"Changed yore mind about things? *Yo're* not goin' to start believin' that mockin'bird is ol' Tod Jenkins, are you?"

Kitty said, "No." Her face had that hard, pinched look again. She put her crocheting aside and stood up. "But I want to drive over to Mrs. Jenkins' right now."

Sam said, "Shore, honey." He didn't understand Kitty, but he was determined to humor her. "I'll get a team hooked up right away."

"I'll change my dress and be ready to go as soon as you are," Kitty told him. "I'd like to get there before Mr. Deever leaves."

CHAPTER XIV

KITTY CAME hurrying out of the front door when Sam drove up in the buggy. He cramped the wheels and jumped down to help her in, but Kitty stepped up into the seat unassisted before he could take her arm. She said sharply, "Let's not waste any time getting there."

Sam got back up beside her and let the eager team out into a fast trot while he studied his wife curiously out of the corner of his eye.

Kitty was obviously under a tremendous tension. Her gloved hands were folded tightly in her lap and she sat erect with her slim shoulders

squared. Her chin was lifted and she stared straight ahead.

Sam said dubiously, "Yo're in a mighty rush all of a sudden, honey. You reckon it's good fer you to get excited like this?"

Kitty didn't relax. She said, "I want to get to the Jenkins ranch before Mr. Deever leaves."

"It ain't so far," Sam encouraged her. "Uh—why did you decide all of a sudden that you wanta see him so bad?"

Kitty shivered a little. She tightened her lips and said, "Please don't ask me, Sam. I want to do what's right. I've got to find out—" Her voice trailed off irresolutely.

"Shore," Sam said. "I ain't meanin' to pry into yore reasons, honey." He shook out the lines to urge the team into a faster trot. He reckoned it was something to do vith having a baby. He'd heard that all women got queer ideas at a time like that. And the thing to do was to humor them and not ask too many questions. If Kitty had decided she wanted to fly to the moon he would have tried to arrange the trip.

"Sometimes," Kitty told him after a little time, "a person doesn't know what's right and what's wrong." She shivered again. "It's terrible not to know where your loyalty lies."

Sam didn't know what she was talking about. It sounded like pure gibberish to him. It seemed like that short visit from the Denver schoolteacher had set her off. Everything had been all right until then. But he hoped, by golly, that Kitty wasn't going to get a crazy religious streak like believing old Tod Jenkins had turned himsxelf into a mockingbird. That would be too much. He wondered if Sally Stevens would be able to advise him. Sally was a mother, but he couldn't recollect Pat ever telling about Sally acting this way.

They rounded a turn and saw a little ball of dust rapidly riding down the road toward them. He felt Kitty stiffen in the seat beside him when they got close enough to see it was a surrey that was approaching. He squinted ahead and muttered, "Looks like one of the widder's teams."

Kitty said, "Slow up a little. If it's Mrs. Jenkins driving him back to town—"

"It ain't," Sam told her. "Two men in the front seat. Looks like Jud Brinlow drivin'. More'n likely he's takin' Deever back." He slowed his own team, and after a moment nodded confidently.

"That's who it is, shore enough. That dressed-up feller ridin' with Jud is Deever. You want I should stop 'em?"

Kitty said, "No. We'll go on to see Mrs. Jenkins."

SAM LET his team out into a faster trot and pulled them to the right to give the Jenkins surrey room to pass. He waved to Jud Brinlow as they passed, and he saw the frock-coated Mr. Deever turn to stare at them with his mouth open as though he wanted to speak but didn't know what to say.

When they were back in the ruts, Sam turned to look at Kitty again. Her face was quite white and she looked angry. He said lamely, "That was Deever, awright. He don't look like a feller that believes in ghosts."

Kitty shook her head but she didn't say anything more. It was only a couple of more miles to the Jenkins' ranch, and Sam's fast-trotting team ate the distance up rapidly. He stopped at the hitching rail outside the front gate and tied the team, then asked Kitty awkwardly, "You want I should go in with you or would you rather I'd stay outside?"

Kitty looked at him in surprise. "I want you to come in with me, of course." She put her hand on his arm and her gloved fingers tightened until they hurt. "I want you to hear all of this, Sam. I want you to help me."

Sam said,"Shore. I dunno what it's all about, but I'll be right with you."

They went up a dirt walk to the front door and Sam knocked loudly.

The door opened after a time and the widow Jenkins' wrinkled face peered out at them. Her features spread out in a smile when she saw who it was.

"Why Mr. and Miz Sloan! Come right on in. I'm so glad you did come

but it's terrible you're too late to meet Mr. Deever. We had such a miraculous demonstration! Do come in."

The shades were tightly drawn in her living room and the air was hot and stifling, filled with a heavy, cloying odor that got into Sam's lungs and choked them when he followed Kitty inside.

When he sputtered for breath, Mrs. Jenkins explained brightly, "It's the incense, Mr. Sloan. You'll get used to it. Mr. Deever brought it with him. It's called Balm of Gilead and it makes the vibrations right."

Sam got out his bandanna and coughed into it, muttering apologetically that he reckoned his vibrations weren't quite up to the smell yet. He groped around in the semi-darkness and sat in a rawhide-seated rocking chair, but Kitty remained standing near the door. She said:

"I want to know what Mr. Deever has been doing, Myra."

"He's wonderful," Mrs. Jenkins told her ecstatically. "So understanding. And he knows all about the sacred Rule of Twelve. He can quote from it almost like he'd wrote it himself."

"He probably did," said Kitty angrily.

"What say?" Mrs. Jenkins blinked and stretched out her long neck.

Kitty said, "I didn't mean to interrupt you. What do you mean about the Rule of Twelve?"

"It's getting your body in tune with the infinite. A series of lessons I got in a pamphlet from Denver. It tells how to create a mood, sort of, that puts one's physical body in communion with the things that a*ren't*. It's what I wanted *you* to learn about, my dear. If you'd only got here sooner—"

"I'm sorry we didn't," said Kitty. "What about the mockingbird?"

"That's the most wonderful manifestation of all. Mr. Deever was just thrilled with it. He says I must be terribly psychic. He never *heard* of it coming so fast and clear before."

"What?"

Overcome with emotion, Mrs. Jenkins got out a handkerchief and sobbed in it.

"Messages from the Beyond. From Tod. Don't you see? Tod's worrying about me running this big ranch all by myself. *He* knows I'm not capable of it. He wants I should marry again. Bless his heart. I never knowed he cared so much when he was here on earth."

Kitty said, "Stop crying in your handkerchief and tell me exactly what Mr. Deever said."

SAM LOOKED at her in surprise. He'd never heard Kitty's voice so hard and clear. She sounded like she was mad clear through. He didn't see why she was mad at Mrs. Jenkins. Looked to him like the old lady was more to be pitied. He started to remonstrate with Kitty but she silenced him with a fierce gesture. "Go on," she told Mrs. Jenkins. "I want to know what kind of an act Dan Deever is putting on with you."

"He's helping me to understand Tod's messages. I can't understand them. I'm not tuned in good enough yet, though goodness knows I haven't missed a one of the exercises—deep breathing and all. But he says I mustn't be impatient. The Inner Secrets will be revealed to me when my vibrations are right."

"In the meantime, *he* tells you what Tod wants *you* to do."

Mrs. Jenkins nodded happily. "Isn't it wonderful for him to come along just when my need is so great? If 'twasn't for him I'd just have thought the mockingbird was just a mockingbird. I'd never have fancied poor Tod would come back thataway."

"Shore sounds funny to me too," Sam put in cheerfully. "Now if he'd grabbed on to the shape of a jackass an' come back a-brayin' it'd be more like Tod."

Kitty stamped her foot angrily. She said, "I'm trying to find out exactly what Mr. Deever told you Tod wants you to do."

"It's not too clear. Not yet. I told him how the song comes every morning just at dawn. And that's a sure sign Tod don't hold with me staying a widow no longer. He knows that it

ain't blessed to live alone and *he* knows it ain't good in the sight of the Lord for a womaan to run a big ranch like this. He wants I should find a man I can trust and then deed it over to him—for eternal happiness."

Kitty said, "I see." She sounded depressed now, uncertain of herself. She told her husband, "I think we'd better go now."

"Do come back," Mrs. Jenkins urged them. "I hope you'll come back when Mr. Deever's here. He promised to come again next Saturday and be here in the morning to hear Tod sing himself. Then he'll know better, don't you see, what Tod's telling me."

Kitty said flatly, "I see just exactly what he's up to." She wrenched the door open and marched out. Sam got up and followed her. He felt that he ought to apologize to Mrs. Jenkins for their abrupt departure, but Kitty was already going down the path to the buggy, and he hurried after her.

HE HELPED her in and then turned to take off his hat and wave it at the shrunken figure of the widow who stood in the doorway watching them go.

He climbed in and wheeled the horses about, then chided Kitty, "You ortn't've flew off the handle like that, hon. If it pleases her to listen to sech foolishment I reckon it ain't gonna do no harm."

"Harm?" Kitty cried fiercely. "It's terrible, Sam. I feel so sorry for her."

"I dunno as I do. Folks like her need somethin' like that to make life int'restin'."

"But don't you see what he's doing?" Kitty wailed.

"I reckon he's got a screw loose same as her."

"But he hasn't, Sam. Dan Deever is smart. And he's cruel. He's getting her all worked up by a fake religion to where she'll marry him and deed the ranch over. Don't you see?"

Sam said gently, "Looks to me like yo're doin' a lot of guessin', honey."

"It isn't guesswork," she told him fiercely. "I know Dan Deever. I know how he works. He's been doing this for years, Sam. Getting money from widows and people who don't know any better by pretending to be religious."

Sam shook his head and looked puzzled. "You mean Miss Dawson's uncle? He's a crook?"

"He isn't her uncle," Kitty said scornfully. "He's just pretending that too."

Sam shook his head in amazement. "You mean she's in with him on it?"

"Oh, I don't know." Kitty twisted her hands together. "I promised her I wouldn't tell. But I *won't* let him do that to Mrs. Jenkins."

"Are you sure about Deever?" Sam asked. "Plumb-certain sure?"

"There's no mistake about him," she told him dully. "I recognized him when he passed in the buggy."

"You knew him back in Denver, huh?"

"Yes. Everyone knew Dan Deever. He must have been arrested a dozen times for things like this. But Judge Prink always managed to get him off."

"Jedge Prink, huh?"

"Yes. I haven't told anybody this, Sam, because I thought it was only fair to wait and see how things worked out. But Judge Prink was one of the crookedest lawyers in Denver. He always won his cases—bribing a jury or something like that."

Sam expelled a long breath. "How about a feller named Crane?" he demanded.

"Gilbert Crane? He's another one I knew back in the old days. What about him, Sam?"

"Nothin'," said Sam grimly. "'Ceptin' that he moved onto the K Bar ranch not long ago. Takin' it right out from under Ezry's nose when Ezry had spoke to Jedge Prink for it 'special."

"I knew some man had taken it over but I didn't know his name." Kitty gripped Sam's arm. "Gilbert Crane isn't a rancher. He's a horse trader who used to hang around Denver. I know the judge got *him* out of one or two crooked deals too."

"How about a feller named Gut-

Luck Lasher—an' a gambler name of Windy Rivers?" Sam asked excitedly.

But Kitty shook her head. "I don't know them. Who are they?"

SAM TOLD her concisely all he knew. And he told her about Pat and the vague suspicions he had confided the preceding night. "Looks like Pat was right," he ended, "only Pat didn't even know about this Deever feller. What about Miss Dawson?" he went on sharply. "You know her too?"

Kitty nodded wearily. "We worked together in Denver. She's no more a schoolteacher than I am, Sam. She used to sing around cheap saloons."

"No good, huh?"

Kitty's chin lifted. "Connie was all right. I always liked her. As far as I know she was on the square. That's why I didn't say anything to you and Mr. Fleming when I saw her today. *I* know how it is when you get stuck in a rut that way. No decent man will look at you."

"I looked at you," Sam reminded her soberly.

"But you're one man in a million. Most men thinl a dancehall entertainer can't be decent. They won't think of *marrying* her."

Sam nodded uncomfortably. "I reckon that is so, awright."

"What are we going to do, Sam? We've got to stop Dan Deever from twisting Mrs. Jenkins around his finger."

"Yep," Sam agreed soberly. "I reckon we had ought to do somethin'. Bes' thing, it looks like, is to tell Pat the whole truth. He's sheriff. He had ought to know about Jedge Prink anyway."

"I know it. I should have told him before. I warned Connie today," Kitty went on, "that I wouldn't keep still if I thought someone in Powder Valley was going to get hurt. That's why I wanted to drive over to the Jenkins ranch—to find out exactly what Dan Deever was up to."

"That was bein' fair enough," Sam assured her. "I reckon I'll mosey out to the Lazy Mare tonight an' tell Pat jest how things stand. He'll know what to do."

THEY HAD no more than reached the Pony Express station when a horse and rider came galloping up from the northeast. The rider was George Williams, one of the hands at the Lazy Mare. He flung himself off his lathered mount just as Sam pulled up the team, and panted, "Miz Stevens sent me riding for you, Sam."

"What's the trouble?"

"Plenty. Dock's gone an' Miz Stevens is plumb worried sick. Pat an' Ezra have been out trailin' him since daylight but they ain't come back yet."

"Dock's gone? You mean he's *lost?*"

"I dunno rightly. He ain't to home. An' I know Pat an' Ezra went out after him at daylight."

"Wait a minute," Sam said sharply. He turned to Kitty who had been listening silently, and explained, "Mebby I know somethin' about that. I heard Crane from the K Bar talkin' to the jedge las' night when they didn't know I was listenin'. An' Crane was mad an' said somethin' about if they'd left the boy alone they would of been better off."

"Oh Sam! Do you suppose they've kidnaped Dock?"

"I dunno." Sam whirled away from the buggy and yelled, "Jeff! Saddle the fastest an' freshest hawse in the corral an' buckle my saddle gun on." He turned toward the house.

Kitty climbed down from the buggy and asked faintly, "What are you going to do, Sam?"

"I'm gonna buckle on my gun 'fore I start ridin'. I reckon I'll stop in at the K Bar for a pow-wow on my way to the Lazy Mare."

CHAPTER XV

NIGHT-DARKNESS CAME on with interminable slowness while Pat and Ezra waited behind a thick clump of juniper overlooking the K Bar ranch house. Leaving their three horses securely tethered out of sight, the sheriff and his one-eyed companion had wriggled through the thicket to a point where they could look down on the ranch house unseen and watch every movement made by the three men below.

They saw nothing to excite further suspicion. For a long time after they took up their vigil, the three men remained inside the house out of sight. Then, as the evening shadows lengthened, Timothy O'Connor and Gut-Luck Lasher came out and took care of the few evening chores necessary at a horse ranch, pumping a fresh supply of water into the long wooden trough, breaking bales of hay and tossing feed to the half dozen saddle-horses penned up in the corral.

At the same time smoke began to curl up from the chimney of the kitchen stove, indicating that the owner was preparing supper while his two hands did the outside work.

It was a peaceful scene—exactly as it might have been on any other evening at any similar ranch, with nothing whatever to indicate that anything out of the ordinary was afoot at the K Bar ranch.

Waiting and watching silently was a terrible strain on Pat Stevens. Every fiber of his body cried out for immediate and violent action. At this short distance he could see the insolent swagger of Gut-Luck as he went about his evening duties, and he had to grit his teeth and hold himself back forcibly from striding down the slope and backing up his questions with gunfire.

But he knew Ezra was right. He knew the logical course was to lie concealed and await developments. If his son was already dead, his boyish body hidden out there somewhere in the wastelands behind the ranch, it wouldn't help matters any to exact immediate vengeance. It wouldn't bring Dock back to life. It wouldn't give Sally back her son. If that were the case, vengeance would be no less sweet for postponing it a few hours.

And if Dock was still alive and unharmed as Ezra believed, it was surely best to wait in the hope that the K Bar men would unwittingly lead them to the boy's hiding place.

Pat knew this reasoning was logical. He kept going over and over it in his mind—but he was still a father—and for the first time in his life he had a difficult time acceding to reason.

Yet he knew Ezra's interpretation of the hoof trails he had followed that day was a strong indication that Dock had been alive and not a prisoner at the time when he discarded his pinto and mounted double on the K Bar horse up to that point was a strong argument to support that belief. And it was, Pat thought, what Dock might have done under the circumstances. If he was determined to hide his trail from Ezra, the boy would have known some ruse like that would be the only way.

The thing that Pat couldn't figure out was why one of the K Bar men would have aided the boy to hide his trail. Neighbors didn't generally help a young boy run away from home. No one else in Powder Valley would have done a thing like that. If Dock had been seen by another rancher and had told what he was doing, he would have been summarily escorted home.

BUT PAT had an uneasy conviction that there was something sinister about the K Bar and its men that had something to do with turning Dock against his father. He had felt it before, when Dock had started visiting Crane every afternoon after school, and he had vaguely sensed it in the incident of the black colt which Crane had insisted should come as a gift from him rather than as a sale to Pat.

It was all tied up, Pat was convinced, somehow with Judge Prink and the way he had given Crane possession of the ranch over Ezra's prior claim. He didn't see why this was so. It didn't make sense. He didn't know why anybody would want to antagonize him, nor why anybody would want to drive a wedge between father and son.

Ezra nudged him and startled him out of his musings. "Look down yonder at the corral, Pat. D'yuh see what I see?"

Pat narrowed his eyes and stared down through the gathering darkness toward the corral below. He

muttered, "Looks like they're saddlin' up a hawse."

"Two hawses," Ezra corrected him. "A blazed-face roan an' that white-stockinged sorrel. The sorrel is the one that carried Dock off las' night."

Pat nodded grimly. Ezra was right. The two K Bar hands were saddling up a pair of horses. He watched in silence while they led the saddled mounts up to the back of the ranch house and ground-tied them, then went inside.

He drew a long breath and muttered, "That looks like the real goods. They've gone in to eat supper."

"We ain't gonna have long tuh wait now," Ezra predicted gleefully. "I betcha they'll be ridin' soon's it gets dark. Shore wish we had a crack at that supper they'll be settin' down to," he added wistfully. "Seems like I kin smell it plumb up here. *Frijoles,* I betcha, an' fried yearlin' steaks."

"I ain't a mite hungry," Pat protested.

"Me neither. I've done got over bein' hongry. It's been so danged long sence my belly saw any vittles that it's done forgot what they taste like," Ezra mourned.

Pat laughed shortly. He inched backward and sat up, then cupped a cigarette paper and poured tobacco into it. "We'd best get a smoke while they're eating super. We won't dare to light up after we take out trailin' them."

"I'll make out with a fresh chaw," Ezra grumbled. "Sorta keep m' jaws in practice fer the time when they get somethin' more nourishin' to work on."

Pat shielded a match carefully and lit his cigarette. Stars came out overhead and a yellow light showed in the kitchen window of the ranch house below.

Pat finished his cigarette and crushed the butt out with his boot heel. He and Ezra sat side by side without talking. They heard the back door of the ranch house open, and a figure stepped into the rectangle of light. It was followed by a second man. Then the door was slammed shut.

Pat got up. He said softly, "This is it. You take the lead in trailing 'em, Ezra. Don't lose 'em but be careful they don't catch on they're bein' trailed."

EZRA didn't say anything. He followed Pat back through the thicket to their saddled horses. Pat mounted and took up the pinto's lead rope. He waited for Ezra to take the lead.

Ezra reined over to him and whispered, "We don't hafta foller too close. We know which direction the backtrail heads out." He rode to the edge of the junipers and stopped his horse in the shadow. There was a thin arc of a moon in the sky, and the stars were very bright, shedding a faint shimmering radiance on the valley.

They could distinctly hear the creak of saddle leather and the thud of hooves as the two K Bar riders rode past them not more than two hundred yards below. Ezra waited until the men were out of hearing before letting his horse forward out of the concealing shadow. Pat Stevens followed close behind. He could hear nothing to guide them, but he had seen Ezra on the trail too often to question him now.

Ezra kept his horse at a walk for a time, then lifted him to a slow trot. Pat stayed close at his heels, leading Dock's pinto behind.

They covered several miles at this gait, with Ezra riding on confidently just as though it was bright daylight and he could see the two K Bar riders clearly.

He didn't hesitate when they reached the stretch of rock hills where he had lost the trail that morning, but followed a devious, winding course that led them upward and to the right of the territory he and Pat had laboriously combed that day.

It was more than an hour after they left the ranch when Ezra stopped his horse suddenly. Pat reined up beside him as Ezra stepped down from the saddle and lay down full-length on the rocky ground.

Ezra lay immobile for a full minute before arising. "They've stopped," he told Pat in a low tone. "'Bout half a mile ahead. Keep yore hawse still till we find out what they're gonna do."

They didn't have long to wait. Ezra had scarcely finished speaking when a blob of light shone through the night from ahead.

"Looks like a lamp inside a house," Pat muttered. "But there ain't rightly no houses up yonder."

"There's that ol' shack on Beaver Crik," Ezra reminded him. "An' that's about where that light is at."

"That's right." Pat swore softly. He swung out of the saddle. "I'm goin' up there, Ezra. Dock must be in that shack."

"Tha's right. I'll tie the hawses here an' be right behind yuh." Ezra caught the reins of Pat's horse as the Powder Valley sheriff went forward over the rocky ground.

PAT MOVED toward the rectangle of light as fast as caution would allow, driven by a fierce exultation now that the final accounting was near. He loosened his guns in their holsters, heartened by the feel of the smooth grips beneath his calloused hands.

He moved forward in a straight line and his stride remained steady as he approached near the tiny lighted cabin. He didn't bother to skulk around to the lighted window nor attempt to spy out the lay of the land.

He made his steps lighter as he neared the front door, stopped for a moment with his hand on the knob.

The confused murmur of voices came to him through the wooden door. He knew his son was inside, with two armed and desperate men. It was going to take steady nerves and straight shooting—

He turned the knob and jerked the door open, stepped forward into the lighted room with both guns clearing leather simultaneously.

He caught a single clear impression of the room before the shooting started. A lighted lantern sat on a wooden box in the center. Dock's white face stared at him from just beyond the lantern. At his left, Tim O'Connor was drinking out of a jug tipped up and resting in the crook of his right arm.

Across from Tim, Gut-Luck Lasher whirled to face him. Pat saw the gunman's contorted face and the flash of a hand downward to the deadly swiveled gun at his hip.

Pat shot Gut-Luck in the middle of his fear-contorted face. The bullet smashed into his front teeth and rocked the gunman backward. With cold and ruthless precision, Pat Stevens fired twice more. Blood mushroomed from Gut-Luck's forehead, and Pat's third bullet tore away the side of his jaw.

Dock screamed shrilly and Pat leaped sideways, swinging his guns in a swift arc. Timothy O'Connor dropped his jug of liquor and was clawing at a holstered gun on his hip.

Pat shot the gun out of his hand, and Timothy promptly dropped to his knees and began pleading for mercy.

EZRA pounded through the door at a run and Pat holstered his guns. He walked past the groveling man and confronted Dock. His eyes were bleak and his voice was hard when he said, "Well, son?"

Dock straightened up manfully. He dug a grimy fist into his eye and choked back a sob and said, "Gee I'm glad you came, Dad. I was gettin'—scared. If I'd had a hawse I'd of come home."

The bleakness went out of Pat's eyes and a hungry look came into his face. He said, "Your mother missed you, son."

Dock came to him timidly. "I missed you both. I'm sorry I ran away. Gee, Dad! When you came in that door a-shootin', it was the best thing I ever *did* see."

Pat put his arm tightly around Dock's shoulders. He turned to watch Ezra tying Timothy O'Connor's hands behind him. He asked Ezra, "What does the old man say?"

"Nothin'," Ezra snorted angrily. "He jest says it's all a mistake. That

him an' his pardner come out here to take Dock back home."

"They didn't either," said Dock excitedly. "I ast them to, first thing when they come, but Gut-Luck said I was to go on with Tim. And Tim was getting drunk. It looked to me like Gut-Luck wanted him to."

Pat said coldly, "Tie him up good, Ezra. We'll leave 'em both inside and set this old shack on fire. Good riddance."

"No! You can't do that," Timothy cried. "You can't leave me tied up. I'll burn to death."

"That," said Pat, "is a purty good idea." He stepped forward and stood over the shaky old man. "If you don't want yore tail scorched, start talking."

"I'll talk," Timothy whimpered. "I'll tell you anything."

"What's this all about?"

"All what?"

"Everything." Pat made a savage gesture. "What're you an' yore boss an' Gut-Luck doing here in Powder Valley? What's Judge Prink got to do with it?"

"I dunno. I swear I don't. Crane offered me the job an' promised me plenty of drinkin' whisky. That's all I know."

"Why did you have Dock here?"

"I dunno that neither. I swear I don't. Gut-Luck done it. He brung Dock here las' night. An' Crane tol' me to come out with him tonight. I was to pretend I was settin' Dock on his way south, but I was to tie him up an' leave him and come back. That's all I know. I swear it is. Cross my heart." The old drunkard began crying like a frightened child.

Pat turned away from him angrily. "Load him on a hawse," he directed Ezra, "and bring him in to the K Bar. I'm ridin' that way to have a talk with Crane. You ride for home, Dock."

GILBERT CRANE opened the front door and peered out anxiously when Pat rode up to the K Bar. He continued to stand in the doorway and his broad face looked worried when he recognized his visitor.

Pat walked straight toward him without saying anything. Crane held his ground until Pat was only one step away, then he moved back, saying with heavy irony, "It looks like you're coming in."

Pat said, "That's right." Inside the living room, he announced calmly, "Yore gun slinger is dead."

"Gut-Luck?" Crane appeared to shrink under Pat's hard gaze.

"That's right. An' the other fellow blabbed us an earful."

Crane made an effort to regain control of himself. "I don't know what you're talking about. Neither of my men are here."

"I know where they are. We followed them tonight—out to the Beaver Creek cabin."

Crane moved back and groped behind him for a chair. His florid face lost some of its color. "You trailed them?"

"That's right." Pat kept his voice at a monotone. "Gut-Luck wasn't so lucky with that fancy shootin' iron of his."

Crane's knees buckled under him. He slid down into a chair. "There wasn't any call for shooting," he protested. "They were just keeping your boy hid out a day or so for a little joke."

"There's a hell of a lot more to it than that," Pat said shortly. "What's yore hook-up with Prink?"

"I don't know what you mean. I told you—"

"A lot o lies," Pat interrupted savagely. "There's somethin' funny goin' on and I mean to know what it is." He slid his hand down to one of his guns. "I'd just as leave kill you too, Crane."

"No. You've got no right to do that. There's nothing between me and Judge Prink. I swear there isn't."

"He's lyin'," came in a low, throaty voice from the door. Pat whirled to see Sam Sloan entering grimly.

"I jest got word Dock was gone," Sam went on. "I think mebby this skunk knows somethin' about it, Pat. I heard him talking to Jedge Prink in the jedge's hotel room last night. And that gambler was in there too. They was talkin' about Dock, an'—"

"No," moaned Crane. "There's some mistake."

PAT SAID, "Shut up," without looking at him. "I've found Dock," he told Sam, "an' now I'm trailin' down whatever slimy goings-on there is between Crane an' the judge."

"An' Deever an' the schoolma'am," Sam put in angrily. "They're all of 'em in cahoots, Pat. An' Windy Rivers, too."

"It's a lie," Crane cried out loudly.

Neither man paid any attention to him. Pat said, "Get yore rope, Sam."

Sam went out to his horse to take the coiled lariat down from his saddle.

Ezra came trotting into the yard while Sam was getting his rope. He was leading a horse with Timothy O'Connor tied belly-down across the saddle. His single eye gleamed happily when he saw Sam Sloan, but he betrayed no surprise or pleasure in his greeting, "How come you allus figger on gettin' around when the shootin's all over?"

Sam grinned broadly. "I figger this here shootin's jest about tuh get started." He ran into the house with his coiled rope.

"Toss the loop around his neck," Pat said savagely. "We'll ride him into town that way if we don't take a notion to throw the other end over a cottonwood limb before we get there."

Sam complied happily, cutting off a short end of the rope to tie Crane's hands behind him. Ezra came to the door while he was doing that, and complained to Pat:

"That ol' feeler has done passed out. I brung him in tied to the saddle."

"Untie him and bring him in here," Pat directed. "We'll use his hawse to ride Mr. Crane into town on."

Sam Sloan dragged Gilbert Crane out with a noose around his neck while Ezra lugged the unconscious Tim O'Connor into the house and dumped him unceremoniously on the floor. A few minutes later the procession started for Dutch Springs with Pat in the lead. Sam was right behind with a lead-rope from Crane's horse tied to his saddle horn; and Ezra brought up the rear with the lariat stretching from Crane's neck to his saddle horn.

CHAPTER XVI

THEY WERE about a mile from Dutch Springs and the sun was just going down when Rudd Fleming reached over and took one of Connie Dawson's hands in his. He held it firmly for a moment without saying anything, continuing a silence that had held both of them for ten or fifteen minutes.

Connie didn't try to take her hand from his. She turned her head slowly and looked at his face. He was looking straight ahead, and he was frowning.

He felt her gaze and he turned to look into her eyes. He said gravely, "I think I'm going to propose to you."

Connie said, "Please don't, Rudd." Her voice and face remained sober. It was the first time she had called him Rudd. He liked the sound of his name on her lips. He asked, "Why shouldn't I?"

"I'd rather you wouldn't."

He said, "You're beautiful, Constance."

She wasn't coquettish about it. She told him frankly, "That's because you've been here in Powder Valley so long. Any girl from the city would look beautiful to you."

"Perhaps," he agreed calmly. "But I don't think I've been here long enough to want to marry just any girl from the city."

"Don't say that," Connie pleaded. "Not yet, Rudd. You hardly know me."

"I feel as though I'd known you always."

"But you haven't. You don't know anything about me."

"I know everything that matters. I'm afraid I've fallen in love with you, Constance."

"You couldn't. Not so soon." Connie tried to pull her hand away

from him. His fingers tightened their grip.

"I have," Rudd Fleming insisted, and his voice was buoyant and strong. "And I'm asking you to marry me."

"It's crazy." Connie tried to laugh. She averted her eyes from his.

"Insane," he exulted. "As though we were a couple of youngsters. That's the way love should be. It isn't a matter of cold reason. It just happens. It *has* happened," he ended resolutely.

"No," Connie said sharply. She twisted her gloved hand out of his. "You mustn't say such things."

"I'm going to keep on saying them. Every time I see you. And I'm going to see you often, Constance."

She had no reply for this. The team trotted on and they were near her boarding house. Rudd Fleming said gently, "I'm sorry if I frightened you. But I thought you knew. I thought my eyes must have been telling you all afternoon that I was falling in love."

She cried out, "Please don't," and her voice trembled despite the effort she made to hold it steady.

"All right," the banker said quietly. "I won't say any more about it—today. But you can't change things. You're going to marry me."

He stopped the buggy outside the Leroy house and jumped down. He went around and held out his hand and Connie put hers in it and he assisted her to the ground. He walked up the path with her, holding her arm tightly. He stopped on the porch and released her arm and said, "It's been a wonderful afternoon."

"It has been nice," she said politely. "Thank you."

RUDD FLEMING lifted his white Stetson and bowed slightly and went back to the buggy. Connie leaned against the door frame and shivered as she watched him go. Her heart was a dull weight inside her. She had never known another man like Rudd Fleming. It had been years since she had been treated like a lady. She hated herself with a fierce and unreasoning hatred.

The Jenkins surrey pulled up in front as Rudd drove away. Daniel Deever got out and the surrey drove away. Connie opened the door and went in. She slowly climbed the stairs to her room.

Deever's heavy tread sounded on the stairs behind her as she went into her room. He came down the hall and entered without knocking. He was beaming with satisfaction and good humor. "Things are certainly going along." He smacked his lips as though the words tasted good. "Another seance or two will have the widow eating out of my hand. And I guess you've got your young man hooked, eh?"

Connie was stripping off her gloves with her back turned to him. She said matter-of-factly, "He asked me to marry him."

"Eh? So soon? Wonderful. The judge will be mighty pleased." Deever chuckled evilly.

Connie kept her back turned. She said, "I refused."

"You—*what?* Great Jupiter, Connie—"

"I'm not going to marry him. I'm going back to Denver where I belong."

"You're going to do nothing of the kind, young lady." Deever strode forward and put his hands on her shoulders and shook her angrily.

She whirled away from him and slapped his face. Tears streaked her cheeks. "You can't keep me here."

He caught her wrist and twisted it cruelly. "The judge will take care of you. You can't run out on the rest of us."

"I'm going to," she told him defiantly. "And if you or the judge try to interfere with me I'll tell everybody everything.

"You're stark raving crazy," he ejaculated.

"I've just come to my senses," she retorted. "This whole thing is crazy. It has been from the first. A bunch of crooks coming in like this to destroy a whole community of happy contented people. It won't work. It's got to fail."

He laughed, showing his strong white teeth. "It won't work, eh? Just when everything's going smooth."

"It isn't going to work," she told him flatly. "I'll see that it doesn't. I'll tell the truth about all of you."

"You'd better tell that to the judge," Deever said ominously.

"I will."

"You bet you will, young lady. Right now. Before you do any talking where people can hear you." Deever pulled her toward the door.

Connie wrenched her arm loose and stalked ahead of him with her chin held high.

THEY found Judge Prink in his room at the hotel. He had just finished supper and was relaxed with his fat body overflowing from a hotel chair.

He laced his fingers together in front of his belly and listened patiently while Deever exploded with Connie's threats, shooting side glances at her through the puffy slits that almost obscured his eyes.

The judge smiled blandly when Deever finished. "Is that right, Connie?"

She stood straight and taut before him with her hands pressed down tightly against her sides. "I'm going back to Denver. I'm through pretending to be a schoolteacher."

"I invested money in your trip," the judge reminded her. "We all have a stake in your success."

Connie said, "I'll pay back the money you spent on me. Just count me out."

Judge J. Worthington Prink sighed heavily. He told Deever, "It looks as though we misplaced our confidence. Do you think we should let her pull out?"

"We can't It would spoil everything. Why, she even threatens to tell the truth about all of us."

"That's an ugly threat," the judge told her. "I think you're overwrought, Connie. I suggest you take a few days to think it over."

"I'm not going to keep on seeing Rudd Fleming," she told him between tight teeth.

The judge waved one dimpled hand. "We're in this together. All for one and one for all. You can do as you like about Fleming. But we can't allow you to upset all our plans." His voice was still a soft purr, but it was heavy with menace.

"That's right. With things coming to a showdown," Deever put in. "All Crane needs is a few more days."

"And Windy is set for the kill tonight," Prink said quietly. "Dasher has challenged him to a no-limit game. No, Connie. I'm afraid we can't allow you to upset things just now."

"I don't see how you're going to keep me from it."

"I'm appealing to your sense of justice," the judge told her softly. "What do you care about these people? They're not your kind. You don't belong here."

"That's why I'm going back to Denver. Back to the Black Angel Saloon on Larimer Street. That's where I belong."

"All right. You can go a little later. All I want is your promise that you'll say nothing to anyone until our work is finished here."

"I won't promise that. I won't let you victimize all these people. I'll keep quiet if you give up the whole plan. Not otherwise."

The judge sighed again. "You're being very unreasonable. You'll cause us to take steps if you persist."

Connie hesitated. Then she asked, "Do you know who I saw this afternoon?"

"How should I know?"

"Kitty Lane."

The judge blinked his lids down over his eyes. Daniel Deever looked angrily shocked and then incredulous. "Kitty Lane? You mean Fred Ralston's wife? That's crazy. I heard they both got killed nearly a year ago pulling one of their badger games."

"Fred may have been killed," Connie told him calmly. "Kitty is still plenty alive. She's living right here in Powder Valley and she's married to one of Sheriff Stevens' old partners. That little runt of a Pony Express rider named Sam Sloan."

Judge Prink opened his eyes. "If

that's true you needn't fear that Kitty will expose you or us. She'd have to expose her own past at the same time."

"Her husband knows all about her past. I don't know any of the story behind it but I talked to her today and Kitty isn't afraid of the truth."

"WHEN THIS change on your part isn't just an attack of conscience," Judge Prink sneered. "You're afraid Kitty will tell Rudd Fleming the truth."

"I don't know," Connie faltered. "I'm just trying to prove to you that you can't get away with it. Kitty's going to start putting two and two together when she finds out all the others are here too. She'll tell her husband and that will be the end of things."

"She hasn't told him yet, eh?"

"No. I begged her not to. She promised me she wouldn't say anything—for awhile anyhow. But she doesn't know about the rest of it. As soon as she finds out—"

"I think," Judge Prink told Deever, "that we must arrange to keep Kitty quiet. After Gut-Luck is through at the K Bar he can visit Sam Sloan's wife on his way out."

"No." Connie backed up toward the door. "I won't let you. If anything happens to Kitty it'll be my fault. I'll tell everyone first." She turned and reached for the doorknob.

Judge Prink nodded to Deever.

Deever stepped forward and clamped one big hand over Connie's mouth, twisting her head back savagely and dragging her away from the door. She writhed and twisted and tried to kick him, and little gurgles of anger came from behind his big hand.

The judge got up reluctantly. He waddled back toward the bed, and Deever dragged the struggling girl to him. He heaved her on top of the blankets and the judge rolled her up securely like a cocoon. Deever sat down on top of her, still holding his hand over her mouth.

He muttered angrily. "She's trying to bite me. If I turn loose now she'll wake up the whole hotel."

"You'd better not turn loose," the judge advised him dryly. He went across to the dresser and got a pair of clean socks from a drawer, came back and tore off the wide hem of the sheet.

Together they bent over the girl and forced the socks into her mouth, then wound the wide strip of cloth around her face securely. With more strips torn from the sheet, Deever tied her legs tightly inside the rolled blanket, and bound up her arms and torso until she was unable to move.

The judge had resumed his seat and was placidly smoking a cigar when Deever stepped back from the bed to survey his handiwork.

The judge purred, "It is regrettable but it shows what happens when you trust a woman. We'll leave her here until later tonight and then dispose of her quietly."

He got up and went to the door. "Suppose we go down and see what sort of success Windy is having."

CHAPTER XVII

THOMAS DASHER picked up the deck and dealt off the fifth card face up. He gave Windy Rivers a jack, and dealt himself the ten of spades. That made Windy a pair of queens, the jack, and a deuce face up, with one card in the hole. Dasher had the seven, eight, and ten of spades, and the joker. The joker was playing as an ace, or wild in a straight or flush. If Dasher had a spade in the hole, his hand was a spade flush. If he had a six, nine, or jack of any suit, his hand was a straight.

Either a flush or a straight would beat anything Windy could possibly have. If Dasher had an ace in the hole, his hand consisted of a pair of aces—beating the jacks Windy had showing, but not good enough to beat Windy if he had another queen, or a jack or a deuce in the hole.

Thomas Dasher's hole card was actually the trey of diamonds, making his hand utterly worthless. But it was a tough hand for the man opposite him to bet into. There were ten spades unaccounted for, four sixes,

four nines, and three jacks. A total of eighteen different cards in the deck, any one of which would give Dasher the winning hand if he had it in the hole.

It was the biggest stud poker game Dutch Springs had ever seen. Men were packed two deep around the table behind the two players, and there was utter silence as Dasher dealt the final cards of the hand and laid the deck aside.

Everybody watched Windy Rivers. His pair of queens made him high in sight. It was his bet, if he chose to be foolhardy enough to bet into the possibilities facing him.

Windy glanced at his cards and at Dasher's possible straight flush. He said, "Check," which was the only plausible thing to do under the circumstances. Actually, Windy knew Dasher's hole card was the trey of diamonds. They had been playing with that deck for half an hour, and Windy's thumbnail had been busy. He had every card marked with a minute indentation on the back that his practiced eye could read as it was slipped off the deck.

He knew Dasher was sitting there with a busted straight-flush—that his pair of queens was the winning hand. But if he made a bet now it would arouse suspicion of the truth—it would be almost obvious that he knew Dasher's hand wasn't any good.

So Windy checked the bet.

The judge and Daniel Deever came into the room from the lobby and moved up behind the ring of interested spectators. Men politely moved aside to let the judge into the inner ring. His fat face was impassive as he viewed the hands and the piles of chips in front of each player. There was nothing in his expression to indicate that Windy was playing with his money, that he had backed the gambler with ten thousand dollars before the game started.

The blue chips were worth a hundred dollars apiece. The reds were fifty and the whites ten.

Thomas Dasher still had a dozen blues, twice that many reds, and a lot of whites. They represented an original investment of five thousand dollars, dwindled to almost half in thirty minutes of playing.

His blunt fingers played with his blue chips, picking them up and letting them dribble back to the table. Beads of sweat stood on his good-natured, florid face. He had a perfect hand to bluff with. There was less than five hundred dollars in the pot in the middle of the table. He could either admit defeat and turn his hole card up, give Windy the pot—or he could make a very heavy bet, so heavy that no sane gambler would cover it in view of the chances that he was beaten.

DASHER stopped playing with his chips and reached down with both hands to tip up one corner of his hole card and peer at it, giving the impression that he was reassuring himself that it actually was one of the cards he needed to give him the winning hand.

No one moved or spoke while he went through this by-play. No one could tell from Dasher's face whether he was bluffing or reassuring himself.

He went back to dribbling his chips onto the table. Windy Rivers rolled a cigarette and waited patiently. He was in no hurry whatsoever. Stud poker was his business and he couldn't lose. Winning was an absurdly easy matter when he had the cards marked and always knew what his opponent had in the hole. The trick was to play his cards as though he *didn't* know.

Thomas Dasher glanced up and around at the circle of tense faces watching him. He smiled slowly. He, too, was putting on an act. He was trying to make it appear that he was hesitating, trying to decide whether to bluff or not—for a smart player like Windy would believe just the opposite if he made his hesitation obvious enough.

He now began carefully counting his chips. He had thirteen blues. He pushed them to one side. He added twenty-four reds to the pile and said aloud, "That's twenty-five hundred."

No one said anything. Windy Rivers watched him impassively. Dash-

er counted out his white chips. Forty-one of them. He mixed them all together and announced in a musing tone, "Twenty-nine hundred and ten dollars. That's a heap of money."

He looked at Windy and then around the circle again. "A heap of money," he emphasized.

He reached out with a sudden gesture as though to push them all into the center, but caught himself and withheld his hand.

He narrowed his eyes at Windy's cards and said, "Queens?" in a surprised tone, as though he was just now noticing what Windy had.

Then he made a sudden decision and finished pushing the chips in, announcing loudly, "All right. I bet twenty-nine hundred and ten I've got the high hand."

It was good poker. It fooled everyone who didn't know what he had in the hole—everyone except Windy Rivers who knew.

It convinced everyone that he really did have the best hand and that he was trying to suck his opponent into a bet by making him believe he was bluffing.

Windy didn't say anything. He began counting out his chips while the Powder Valley men about the table looked at each other elatedly, convinced that the hotel keeper was going to make a killing.

Windy put twenty-nine blues and one white chip in the center of the table and said, "Call." He didn't make the mistake of overplaying his hand and raising. That would have made it apparent that he wasn't afraid of Dasher's hand, would have caused suspicion that the cards were marked. By merely calling, he marked himself only as a man who couldn't be bluffed.

Dasher began cursing in a low monotone and turned his trey of diamonds over. He ripped the five cards savagely across while Windy drew in the six-thousand-dollar pot.

"I'm buying a new stack and we're getting a new deck," Dasher announced angrily. "Damned if I see how you had the guts to call that bluff, Rivers."

Windy shrugged and went on stacking his chips. All around the table men began talking excitedly about the drama they had just witnessed, trying to analyze wherein Thomas Dasher had failed to act convincingly enough to scare Windy out of betting.

A new deck of cards was brought, and Dasher bought a new stack of chips and play was resumed. It seesawed back and forth for a time with each man winning small pots while Windy was busy getting the new deck marked so he could settle down to serious business again.

PAT STEVENS and Sam Sloan came in together. Dasher saw the sheriff and beckoned to him with a broad smile. "We need another poker player to take a hand, Pat. Sit in and maybe you'll change my luck."

"Is yore luck bad?" Pat moved forward where he could survey the table.

"Terrible. This is my second stack of chips."

Pat frowned at the neat piles of chips in front of Windy Rivers. "If the blues ain't worth mor'n fifty cents, I'll sit in," he offered.

Dasher laughed weakly. "Blues are a hundred."

"Dollars?"

"Sure. No limit. That's why there's just two of us. You can't afford a game like this, sheriff."

"Why no. I reckon not." Pat's voice was deceptively mild. He watched Windy's soft fingers dealing the cards, caressing each one as he slid it off.

"Reminds me of a game I sat in onct down in Tombstone, Arizona," Pat went on.

Windy glanced up at him sharply, but said nothing.

"That was a hell of a long time ago. I was just a brash kid, sort of big for my pants," Pat chuckled. "But I shore learned plenty about stud poker quick."

Windy was high in sight with a king. He bet a red chip. Dasher covered the bet. He looked up at Pat and said, "Go ahead."

"There was a gamblin' man sitting in that game an' he kept winnin' too

steady to suit me," Pat grinned. "I figgered I was some punkins of a poker player an' I didn't see how he done it. Damned if it didn't look like he had some sort of second sight an' always knew what my hole card was. When I had him beat he'd fold up, an' when I bluffed he'd always know it an' call me."

Windy stiffened but he dealt two more cards, making Dasher high with an ace.

"I know just how you must have felt," Dasher chuckled. "Same thing's been happening here. Take a little while ago. I had a four-card straight flush showing—"

"Your bet," Windy interrupted him.

Dasher was too interested in his grievance to pay any heed.

—"and Windy was high in sight with a pair of queens. Well, he checked the bet to me of course, and I —how would you have played it, Pat?"

"If I had a bum hole card?"

Windy said, "The ace makes you high."

"THAT'S the way it was," Dasher told Pat eagerly. "I had a damned trey of diamonds in the hole. Didn't match up my straight *or* flush. But I'd played it right through just like I was building up a real betting hand."

Pat nodded judicially, "Only thing to do in a case like that—"

"Is this a poker game," Windy demanded witheringly, "or a talk-fest?"

Dasher looked at him in surprise. "I'd like to get Pat's opinion on that hand. He's the best poker player in Powder Valley—"

"But he's not playing in this game," Judge Prink put in jovially. "An opinion expressed by an onlooker on the relative merits—"

Sam Sloan had moved up close behind the judge. He muttered, "Happens yo're a onlooker too, jedge. S'posin' you keep yore mouth shut."

"I was merely—"

"Buttin' in," Sam Sloan finished for him. "Go ahead, Pat, an' tell Tom Dasher how he should ort to play a hand of poker."

"Only thing to do with a busted hand is bet it so high the other fellow can't afford to call," Pat told Dasher.

"That's what I did," Dasher said angrily.

"Prob'ly didn't bet high enough," Pat tried to comfort him.

"Not high enough, hell!" Dasher exploded. "I pushed my pile out in front of him. Lacking a little bit of three thousand."

"An' he up an' called you?" Pat asked sardonically.

"That hand is over," Windy said. "We got another one now—"

"He sure did," Thomas Dasher said with a sigh. "And me without even a pair."

Pat said evenly, "That more'n more reminds me of that game in Tombstone I was tellin' you about. Makes a man feel, by golly, like maybe yo're playing with a marked deck."

Windy pushed his chair back a few inches. He placed his slender hands carefully on the table in front of him and looked up at Pat with narrowed, glinting eyes. "Are them remarks meant for this here game?"

"I'm talkin' mostly about that game in Tombstone," Pat told him gently.

Men began to move backward from behind Pat. Nobody said anything.

"What I was aimin' to tell you," Pat went on to Dasher, "was how that gamblin' man worked it."

"There's nothing like that going on here," the hotel proprietor said with some asperity. "That was a new deck. Right out of my stock. It couldn't have been marked."

"This fellow in Tombstone kep' his thumbnails sharpened down to a point," Pat said pleasantly. "Just before a game he'd sandpaper 'em down thin—just like yores, Windy."

There was concerted movement now as men jostled each other to get out of the line of fire.

PAT STOOD straight and unconcerned beside the table, looking down at the gambler's hands. "Ever been in Tombstone?"

Windy Rivers said, "Men have been killed for that kind of talk."

Pat chuckled. "I saw that kind of killin' the time I'm tellin' about. Man

sat at the table just like you're sittin' now. Hands out in front of him like that. One of the players that'd gone broke came up like I am with his gun in a holster—"

One of Windy's hands moved so rapidly that the human eye could not follow the movement. A tiny derringer appeared in his fingers.

It spurted flame at the same moment that Sam Sloan jerked Windy's chair over backward. The bullet went into the ceiling.

Sam leaped in the air and came down with both booted feet in the gambler's face.

Pat Stevens turned sideways and rammed the muzzle of a .45 deep into Judge Prink's bulbous belly. "Tell Deever not to start nothin'," he warned, but he was too late.

Deever had caught up a chair and swung it at Sam's head.

Pat shot the religious faker through the stomach and the chair clattered to the floor harmlessly.

Pat kept his other gun in the judge's belly. "The jig's up," he told Prink grimly. "Ezra's got Crane outside the hotel dancin' on his toes with a rope around his neck, an' he's tol' us plenty. Get to heatin' a barrel of tar," he directed the men around him. "An' I hope you had chicken for supper here in the hotel, Tom."

"We did." Dasher jumped up excitedly. "Windy had a derringer up each sleeve."

"Just like he used to carry 'em in Tombstone," Pat grunted. He gave Prink a shove backward into the eager hands waiting for him. "Hunt up three rails when you get the tar plenty hot. And you dig out all the chicken feathers you've got in the kitchen, Tom. It'll take a heap to feather up the judge good."

"What's this all about, Stevens?" Rudd Fleming pushed forward excitedly. "Is that man on the floor dead? Miss Dawson's uncle?"

Pat nodded pityingly. "Only he ain't really her uncle. Not 'cording to Crane. The judge planned it all an' brought 'em here plannin' to sort of clean the Valley out of ready cash."

"But Miss Dawson? What about her?"

Pat said, "She got dragged into it without quite meanin' to, I reckon. It was her that put us on to them this afternoon. Talkin' to Kitty Sloan. That right, Sam?"

Sam had both of Windy's derringers and he was breathing hard. "That's right," he said jerkily. "But I guess somebody oughtta tell Rudd she ain't really no schoolteacher. She ain't," he added angrily, "no better nor no worse than my wife."

Pat said to Rudd, "If you can stand that—"

Rudd Fleming laughed shakily. "Thank the Lord she isn't a schoolteacher. When she refused to marry me this afternoon I thought it was because she'd rather keep her job. If she hasn't got any job—"

Pat laughed and pounded him on the shoulder. "Go on and find her an' keep her away from here. This ain't goin' to be any fit sight for a lady when we get that tar to boilin' an' start stripping the judge's clothes off."

(THE END)

ANNOUNCEMENT:

Watch for the April 1946 Issue of

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"GUNS ALONG THE CIMARRON"

THE PLACE WHERE HELL FROZE OVER

By V. Crawford

A True Story of The Old West

High in the craggy Wasatch, the eerie cliffs poured out their treasure—gold, silver, copper, lead, zinc. Six sawmills, six breweries, twenty-six saloons, forty wild women, one street organ, one clairvoyant, avalanches of snow, gave Alta, Utah, the fitting name—"The Place Where Hell Froze Over." The mines yielded forty million dollars but the cemetery grew faster than the town.

ON THE granite crest of the Wasatch, at the head of Little Cottonwood Canyon, the mining district of Alta, Utah, stretches over a vast amphitheater pocked by a thousand shafts. The wild Albion Basin, glaciated, faulted, gouged, bears at the worst of winter thirteen feet of snow. Slides of the white death roar down the gulches in spring. Summer is flowered and cool.

Between 1865 and 1873 thousands of prospectors flocked to this alpine wilderness. "Name me a mineral and I'll find it at Alta," they said. The rich claims poured out native silver, native copper, metallic gold, lead, zinc, a score of lesser minerals. The Ridges were combed, gullies searched, peaks tunneled. Secret Lake, Rustler Mountain, Devil's Castle—these were names that might mean a million.

Big Brass was a typical camp follower, worked when he had to, drank when he could. In one winter he dug $60,000 worth of ore from the Toledo claim.

Two young engineers decided to pull up stakes and hit it for Nevada. They engaged the town's worst sot to keep up the assessments on their claim high on the cliff wall. The engineers left. The sot hired every miner in Alta by raising their pay. In a few months he left the camp with seventy thousand dollars.

Beggars and hoboes turned millionaires. The rich ore was "rawhided" down the cliffs, loaded into ox-drawn wagons, freighted twenty-seven miles to Salt Lake City, railroaded to the coast, shipped to Wales.

Mines received fantastic names—Gladiator, Revolution, Grizzly, White Squaw, Highland Chief, Lady Esther, Black Bess, April's Fool, Damn Fool. The first big shipment of 4200 tons of ore yielded $185 per ton. . . Bonanza in any man's language. A single mine yielded four million dollars. Properties changed hands at prices too fabulous for bankers to believe.

THE peak of the boom came in 1872. Five thousand people thronged in and out of the wild Basin. Six sawmills hacked out timber for mines and buildings. Hotels boasted three stories. Six breweries feverishly concocted "Fire water" for twenty-six saloons. Some forty "fluzzies" paraded the narrow streets decked in red velvet, purple satin, ostrich plumes, jeweled combs, daring decolletes. Alta Nell worked her own claim and was beholden to no man. A midas mine was named for Kate Hayes. Life was high, wide, and handsome.

An ear-ringed clairvoyant uttered dire predictions from her dirt-roofed cabin at the foot of Collin's Gulch. She said the cemetery would grow faster than the town. She said Hell would freeze over.

An organ, tuned by a mine mechanic, was set up on the street in front of a red-light house, and a "Cleopatra of the Cliffs" wrung mournful hymns from the heaving

bellows. "From Afar Gracious Lord thou hast gathered thy people. . ." Anthems echoed to the granite ledges.

But Alta was a fighting town. Even the pigs and dogs battled. The two most prosperous saloons—"The Bucket of Blood" and "The Gold Miner's Daughter" hired men to clean up after the killings. One hundred and one men were carried out of the saloons and buried in "Boots On" Cemetery at the foot of Rustler Mountain. It was said that more gun powder was used for "varmint" killing than for blasting in the mines.

WITH no warning great banks of snow broke loose from the crags and heaved over the Basin. Wrecked hotels and cabins were hastily rebuilt. Another day—another avalanche. During Alta's "prosperity" one hundred and forty lives were sacrificed to the ice-god of the Wasatch.

The cemetery grew faster than the town. The clairvoyant nodded her head. Her ear-rings bobbed; Hell was freezing over. The cemetery was growing.

In the spring of 1873 a mysterious stranger appeared. He had a long serious face, black broadcloth suit, low voice. Every day he visited the cemetery, walking slowly among the graves. Back at the hotel he would say—"Too bad—too bad—too many graves on Rustler Mountain."

Then one day the stranger made a proposition. He offered to resurrect all the dead in the cemetery.

Aghast, the town held a meeting. Should they give the stranger the go ahead signal. Many objected. Widows and widowers who had married again didn't want their spouses resurrected; inheritors of Alta's riches refused to have the previous owners returned to the land of the living. Consensus of opinion—let the dead stay dead.

A purse of $2500 was quickly raised and turned over to the solemn stranger. He took the stage down the canyon and never returned. The dead slept on at the foot of Rustler Mountain.

AND, Alta, in its haze of gun fire, prospered. The railroad came. The British royal family bought property.

Sometimes the snow piled ten to forty feet deep. More than fifty avalanches plunged over the rim. Cabins and men were buried, hotels lost, saloons smashed. Every winter took its toll. In 1873 Congress demonetized silver. One by one the mines closed, miners drifted away. In 1885 great walls of snow plunged down from the Emma Hill, destroyed most of the town, killed fifteen people, started fires which burned up most of the remaining buildings.

Since the eighties, mines have been opened and reopened, new prospects dug, new cabins built, pseudo-booms have come and gone, but the days of glory never returned.

Now the Alta-basin is far famed as a ski resort. Uncle Sam trains his white-clad mountain men on the perilous slopes of the Wasatch. International champions of the sport seek new records on the unrivalled runs of Alta. For eight months each year the fine powered snow gleams in the place where Hell has frozen over.

(THE END)

A Great New Novel by LEE FLOREN
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Look For
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COMPLETE COWBOY
Fall Issue

LAWMAN'S PRIDE

By Gunnison Steele

Sheriff Tate wanted that three thousand dollars for his crippled son, but the price was too great . . .

THE WINTRY wind shouldered roughly against Signal's frame buildings. But Sheriff "Beaver" Tate, hunkered before a warm stove in his office, heard the two quick, muffled shots.

The wiry, bandy-legged old lawman got up instantly, buckled on his gunbelt, donned hat and coat and went out into the dark, windy street. He paused a moment on the boardwalk, not sure where the shots had come from. But just then the door of the 'Frisco Bar saloon, directly across the street, opened and a stocky, bare-headed puncher came out and headed at a run across toward the sheriff's office.

The stocky puncher's name was Smoky Runnels. Beaver Tate met him in the middle of the street, and asked sharply, "What it is it, Smoky?"

"Tom Schell," Smoky said excitedly. "He's been shot—killed!"

"Who done it, and why?"

"That fancy-dressin' young hellion who's been hanging' about town all day, drinkin' and playin' tough, who calls hisself Kid Silver. Him and Tom Schell and a couple of others was playin' poker, and Tom accused Kid Silver of second-dealin'. He done it, too, because I was standin' right behind him and saw it. Well, the Kid took Tom's cussin', like he was kind of yella. And then, when Tom got up and started to walk away, Kid Silver pulled his gun and shot Tom square in the back!"

"Is he still over there?"

"Yeah! He dared anybody to take it up. So I headed out to get you."

Beaver said calmly, "I'll see about it," and started on across the street.

"Better be careful," Smoky called. "He's snake-pizen and wolf-tricky!"

The sheriff walked on, pushed open the door to the 'Frisco Bar and stepped inside, pausing a moment in the smoke-filled light to rake the room with his frosty eyes. Probably a score of men were in the room, but the place was very quiet. Several men were gathered about a motionless figure lying face-down on the floor near a poker table.

But the runty sheriff's gaze riveted almost instantly on the slender, dudishly-dressed young hombre standing alone at the bar with a whiskey glass in his hand. The youngster wore a pearl-handled sixgun; he was hard-eyed, with dark, cruel features. He was a stranger in Signal, having ridden into town that morning, and all day he'd been raising hell in general, drinking and playing poker and bragging about how tough he was.

Bitterly, seeing the still figure there on the floor, Beaver Tate berated himself for not having corraled Kid Silver, as he called himself, before this happened.

AS BEAVER entered, Kid Silver was saying sneeringly, "You brush-poppers give me a pain! Too dumb to play poker, and when you lose you start squawkin'. This hombre had a fair chance—"

Hearing the thud of Beaver's boots, as Beaver crossed the room, he broke off abruptly, and pivoted. He didn't reach for his gun, but stood motionless, his eyes narrowing down wickedly. Beaver walked up close to him, stopped.

"You shoot Tom Schell?" he asked mildly.

"Yeah! What about it?"

"Why, killin's a bad thing. A crime, too."

"He asked for it. He accused me of cheatin,' which was a lie. Then he grabbed for his gun—"

"I hear different!" Beaver's voice was suddenly flat and cold. "Kid, I'm

arrestin' you and chargin' yuh with murder!"

Kid Silver stepped a little way from the bar, thin lips curling down. Beaver's coat was open and now he saw the badge on Beaver's shirt.

"A star-packer, huh?" he sneered. "Well, get this, you old goat: I ain't never been arrested and I don't aim to be now!"

"Don't be a fool, Kid! I'll just take yore gun—"

Kid Silver snarled, "You'll take some hot lead!" and grabbed for his fancy gun.

But Beaver had expected that, and was already driving in, bent low. His shoulder slammed into Kid Silver's stomach, and then, as the Kid jack-knifed, he straightened, smacking his head with the sound of a pistol shot up under Kid Silver's chin. Kid Silver reeled backward against the bar, groaning and flailing the air with his arms.

Before he could get set and clear his head, old Beaver drove at him again, slamming his head like a battering-ram into the stunned Kid's stomach. The breath went out of the Kid with a loud *whoosh-h!* and he jack-knifed again. Then, deliberately, Beaver blasted his horny old fist against Kid Silver's chin.

Kid Silver slumped forward to the floor where he lay writhing, not unconscious but too dazed to offer resistance. By the time his head cleared sufficiently to realize what was happening, he was across the street in a jail cell.

Then he began cursing the bandy-legged sheriff wickedly.

"You can't keep me here," he yelled. "Never was a jail made that could hold Kid Silver. I got friends—they'll bust this rat-nest wide open—"

"Shut up," Beaver said tiredly. "When you shot Tom Schell in the back, son, you got yoreself into a mess of trouble. And I got troubles of my own to worry about."

He went along the jail corridor with the lantern, shutting the door to his office up front so he couldn't hear Kid Silver's furious tirade...

NEXT day, soon after noon, Beaver saw the two strangers ride into Signal. He studied them closely as they rode slowly along the street. One of them was lithe, catlike, dark-faced; the other was stocky, blond, with flat, cruel features. He didn't know them.

They rode slouched in the saddle, apparently at ease, but the sheriff saw that they were wary, alert. He watched as they dismounted and entered the 'Frisco Bar. Thereafter, for a couple of hours, he saw them occasionally as they went from place to place, obviously purchasing supplies.

Old Beaver frowned, trying to place them. He even went through a bunch of dog-eared reward fliers in a desk drawer. But without success.

Finally, about midafternoon, the two crossed the street and pushed open the door to the sheriff's office. They separated as they entered, one sliding to each side of the doorway, and stood looking at the runty sheriff seated behind the scarred desk.

"Howdy, gents," Beaver said. "What kin I do for you?"

The wiry, dark man asked, "You the sheriff?"

"That's right—Beaver Tate. Have seats."

"We'll stand. And we knew yore name. We been askin' some questions about town."

Beaver asked mildly, "Find out much?"

"Plenty! For one thing, you got a young gent named Kid Silver in jail here, ain't you?"

"Yep!"

"We'd like to make bond for him."

"Nope! Murder ain't a bailable offense. Not in Texas. I didn't get you hombres' names."

"And you won't! Look, sheriff—we've got money. We'll make a cash bond, any reasonable amount, if you'll turn the Kid loose."

Beaver shrugged. "I couldn't, even if I wanted to. It's the law. Kid Silver is charged with murder."

The two looked at each other. Under the desk, Beaver had his six-

gun in his hand. They might have known it.

"Somethin' else," said the stocky man. "We heard you had a crippled grand-kid. Can't walk, or somethin'. That right?"

Beaver nodded, without expression. "Name's Tommy. My gal's boy, age nine. His daddy died when he was a baby, and they lived with me since. Six months ago, while he was out ridin', Tomy's pony fell with him. Hit the button's back against a rock and hurt his spine. He ain't walked a step since."

"That's what we heard." The dark hombre grinned. "The sawbones here can't do anything for him. But you had a big specialist come up from Dallas a couple of months ago and look at him. This specialist said he could cure the button, but he'd have to spend a long time in a big hospital and that would take a lot of money. Three thousand dollars, wasn't it?"

"That's right. And since you know all about it, you know I ain't got the money, and it would take mebby ten years to save that much." Beaver frowned, asked bluntly, "Why you bring that up?"

The dark man countered, "You think more of that crippled youngster than anything else on earth, don't you?"

Beaver nodded, said, "What about it?"

"We aim to be reasonable, sheriff. We want the Kid out of jail—bad. We aim to have him, one way or another. But we don't want trouble with the law. Here it is, straight: You need three thousand dollars, bad; and we'll give it to you—if you'll let Kid Silver escape tonight."

BEAVER TATE was quiet a moment, looking at them with frosty, expressionless eyes. They didn't see the sudden upsurging of hope inside him, where for despairing weeks there had been no hope. He *did* want to see that towheaded button walk, more than anything else on earth.

"Nobody'd blame you," the dark-faced hombre was saying softly. "You could fix it so he could pry a window bar loose. You'd have three thousand dollars—and that grand-kid of yours could ride and romp and play like the other kids."

"What if I won't do it?"

"You mean, you *won't* do it?"

Beaver didn't answer, because in that brief, dark moment his confused mind couldn't find the answer it sought. The wiry stranger looked at the stocky man, and grinned. He took from his pocket a sheaf of crisp yellowback banknotes, counted out several and tossed them onto the desk.

"Three thousand," he said. "You see, sheriff, we trust you. But don't get any funny ideas about double-crossin' us, or won't you or that boy either one live long enough to get any good outa that dinero. Just fix it so the Kid can get away, I don't care how. He'll know where to find us. Savvy?"

Still Beaver Tate didn't answer, just sat staring as if hypnotized at the gleaming banknotes. The two strangers turned and strode from the office.

Old Beaver picked up the money and drew it between his gnarled fingers, listening to the crinkly sounds. He felt kind of dazed. He hadn't said he would turn Kid Silver loose—but he hadn't said he wouldn't, and the two had accepted his silence as concurrence. He hadn't answered, because uncertainty had momentarily numbed his mind and paralyzed his tongue.

Here was money that would drive the sadness and despair from Tommy's brave eyes; it would make him so he could run and ride and swim like other boys, like all boys were supposed to do. Tommy thought his gran'daddy was the bravest, squarest sheriff in the world. When he grew up he wanted to be *a* sheriff, just like Beaver, and fight for the law.

But you couldn't fight for the law unless you believed in it. The bright flame had to be inside you before you

could be willing to risk your life to uphold the law.

Beaver dropped the money suddenly, like it had burned his fingers. Tommy would rather never walk than be cured with bad money.

Beaver scooped up the money again, reared to his feet. Hatless, coatless, he went out into the windy street. The two strangers had just left the 'Frisco Bar and were going quickly toward their horses at the tie-bar a few yards away. Except for these three, the wind-lashed street was almost deserted. A single rider on a big sorrel was just entering the upper end of the street. A tall hawk-faced rider wearing a cream Stetson.

As the two started to climb onto their horses, Beaver called out sharply, "Just a minute there, strangers!"

THE TWO wheeled away from their horses, and got very still. They watched Beaver Tate, their eyes hard and wary, as he came up close to them, and stopped.

"You gents made a mistake," Beaver said mildly.

The dark rider growled, "And you're makin' one now, old man!"

"I'm not turnin' Kid Silver loose," Beaver went on. "But I aim to be fair. Here's yore—"

"He's onto us!" spat the stocky man. "Let's down 'im, bust the Kid out, and get outa here!" And he grabbed for his gun.

Beaver slammed the sheaf of banknotes, which he had been about to give back to the men with the advice to get out of town, into the stocky man's face. It startled him, knocked him off-balance, and before he recovered Beaver drove in and smashed his shoulder into the blond hombre's chest. The blond gunman grunted, staggered violently backward and tumbled with a terrific splash into a watering trough.

Beaver whirled like an old tomcat, hand slapping downward for his old Peacemaker. He felt slashing pain in his side, saw smoke and flame leap out from a gun in the dark hombre's hand, heard the gun's coughing roar. He fell sidewise, to one knee; he braced himself there, firing at an upward angle.

Shocked surprise slapped at the dark killer's face. He shivered, turned and walked three steps toward his horse, then sprawled slowly froward on his face in the dusty street like he was going to sleep.

The stocky man had clawed up out of the watering trough. But he'd lost his gun in the water, and now he was pawing frantically for it.

Beaver said coldly, "Let it alone, hombre—and turn around, with yore hands high!"

The stocky man twisted his head about. Then, seeing the sheriff's gun-muzzle trained on his back, he obeyed sullenly.

DOORS WERE opening and men coming into the street. But the tall, hawk-faced man was the first to reach the scene. At the first gunshot he had spurred forward, and now he dragged his horse to a halt and leaped to the ground, gun in hand.

He saw the badge on Beaver Tate's shirt, and said, "I'm Nick Tabor, deputy U. S. Marshal. Looks like I got here just too late."

"Looks like," Beaver admitted mildly. His side hurt, but he knew he wasn't badly wounded. "Kind of funny about these two. I wasn't aimin' to arrest 'em. I just aimed to tell 'em to ride on—but they grabbed their hardware and started smokin' it up."

Amazement over-spread the marshal's face. "You mean, you don't know who these two skunks are?"

"Nope. Likely a couple of two-bit badmen, friends of the younker callin' hisself Kid Silver who I jailed last night on a murder charge—"

"Two-bit badmen, my eye! They're Bart Silver and Jance Creel, two of the snakiest killers ever to come out of the Territory. They robbed a mail train, across the Kansas line a month ago, murderin' an express guard, and I been trailin' 'em south ever since. This Kid Silver is Bart Silver's kid brother. They picked up the Kid at their Territory hideout and crossed over into Texas. I lost their trail a week ago, at Red River, but picked up a little later." Nick Tabor turned

to the stocky outlaw. "Creel, why'd you three stop here in this town?"

"We didn't," Jance Creel said sullenly. "We had a good hideout in the hills up above here, where we'd stopped for a rest. But the kid got restless, and two nights ago he slipped away and rode into town lookin' for whiskey and excitement. When he didn't show up, me and Bart come lookin' for him. We found him in jail, charged with murder. Bart figured he could buy the Kid out, and we wouldn't have to raise any hell and have to start runnin' ag'in. I thought. . . . " He paused, looking at the bank-notes that the wind had scattered along the street. He said disgustedly, "Where we made our mistake was—"

"Was in bein' a couple of lousy killers," the marshal said grimly. "Now Bart's dead, and you and the Kid'll hang."

Old Beaver, too, was looking at the banknotes dotting the street. He was thinking bitterly, but without regret for what he'd done, what happiness that money could have bought for a freckled, towheaded boy. Marshal Nick Tabor's voice seemed to come from a vast distance.

"You'll get the bounty money on these skunks' mangy hides, sheriff. Let's see. . . .a thousand on the Kid, two thousand each for Bart Silver and Jance Creel. Comes to even five thousand, don't it?"

(THE END)

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Ed remembered another gun-battle over a dance-hall skirt . . .

DECISION AT SUNDOWN

By T. W. Ford

***Ed** didn't want to smoke down this brash youngster over a two-bit floozy, still he knew he couldn't run from young Frabee.*

HE COULD feel the bite of eyes all around the honky tonk as he fingered his smooth jaw and picked up his glass of redeye with a steady hand. Over the tops of the half-leaf doors he could see the final rays of the westering sun staining the cracked window of the hay and feed store across the wide road. In a few more minutes it would be sundown and he would be going down the road to meet, at gun point, that locoed, love-sick button. Big Joey leaned down beside him.

"Ed, me and Tex can handle that crazy kid. Just say the word and we'll slip out and grab him. He'll be busting the breeze outa town afore we half finish. Just say the—"

Ed smiled thinly, straightening his small slim body away from the bar. He straightened the gray frock coat that was part of his dudish rig in this role of posing as Diamond Queen the well-known gambler. Only what folks here in Gunstock didn't know was that Queen had dropped dead of a heart attack a few weeks ago down on the Rio one night. Ed shook his head and fingered the slight cut at the end of one lip where that young Red Frabee had slapped him.

"Thanks, Joey. You and Tex keep your hooks outa it," Ed said softly. "I can handle that danged idiot myself. Called me a tinhorn and threatened to run me outa town like a dog with its tail 'tween its legs, didn't he?"

Big Joey shrugged, knowing Ed's pride and the implacable iciness of his fury when he was roused. Ed glanced around for the girl who had been the cause of it all, but the honky tonk proprietor had sent her upstairs before she could cause any more trouble. She really wasn't important, Ed knew. Just a fluffy-headed girl with big blue moons of eyes with whom he had amused himself since he'd stopped off in this town. He had been sitting at that corner table with his arm around her when Frabee had strode in an hour ago, and the kid had gone berserk when he saw the picture.

Even when he had yanked Ed out of the chair by his coat lapels, Ed had managed to keep his temper. He'd read the signs, a calf-eyed button in love with this honky tonk entertainer. One of these days he'd get his eyes fully opened and never give her kind a second look.

"Let's go over to the bar and have a drink on me," Ed had suggested after the ranny warned him to stay away from the girl.

But Frabee had been haywire. He had called Ed a lily-livered tinhorn and warned him to be out of town before sundown. Ed had told him not to be a damn fool. "Skirts like her are two-bits a—"

THEN Frabee had slashed him across the mouth with an open hand. Some men had jumped in and dragged him back, struggling. "I'll be coming up the road at sundown, tinhorn!" he had screamed before he was taken outside.

And now it was almost sundown. The batwing doors creaked and a man stepped in. "Frabee's waiting down around the corner by the bank."

Big Joey caught at Ed's arm. "Look, boss, let—"

"Keep outa it," Ed said tightly. He eased the gun in the thonged-down scabbard on his right thigh, and then put a match to one of his tailor-made cigarets. When he looked down directly at the others along the bar, their eyes screwed away. His shoe button ones were cold and glassy now, reminiscent of the bores of twin guns. He looked out the doorway again. The hay store window across the way was grayish, untouched by sun rays any more.

"Sundown," somebody whispered hollowly.

Ed moved toward the door, easing the unbuttoned frock coat and rubbing the palm of his left hand on his pant leg. Stepping out, he went down the steps quickly, then waited in the shadow of the big eucalyptus tree. . . And down the long block, red-shirted lanky Frabee eased around the corner down by the bank. His boots threw up lazy-floating dust puffs as he headed up the line.

"Git the hell outa here afore I kill you," Ed called down to him, stepping through the ragweed of the gutter.

Frabee gave no sign, coming on unhurriedly yet inexorably with the long swinging strides. Little Ed began to move, closing up the distance between them. From behind he heard Big Joey's spur scrape on the wooden sidewalk. Big Joey and Tex would see he didn't get drygulched by any friends of the kid. A door hinge squeaked and from the corner of his eye Ed saw two men peering out the partially opened door of a store.

The advancing Frabee threw up a hand and brushed at sweat on the forehead of his boyish freckled face. He was hatless. Ed wore the stovepipe gambler's hat that went with his role. He was deadly calm, not the sign of a tremor in his compact catlike body. A dog barked somewhere and it brought another scene back to him. A scene just like this that had happened years ago, and it had been over a girl, too. A dog had barked that evening just before the first gunshots blasted out.

THAT other girl's face flashed through his mind. She had been a waitress in a restaurant in the town

down the line from the Lazy-T where he'd worked then. He and that big florid stranger had tangled over the girl, shot it out in the road, too. He had killed the stranger, and inside of a few hours, he had been a hunted hombre beating it down the trail in the saddle for his very life. The stranger had turned out to be a judge from over at Creosote city, and his friends had quickly rallied to clear his name and charge Ed with having taken him from behind.

A price had been put on Ed's head. From that day on, he had been an outlaw. All his chances, the opportunities of his past, had been blotted out. Never now would he own his own spread. That waitress, he had learned afterward, had been no better than the Creosote judge had inferred. And it would have been suicide to go back home to that Sarah he had really loved. Now. . .

ED TWISTED his mind back to the present as he caught the glitter of the white pearl buttons of Frabee's shirt in the sun's afterglow. The young ranny's boot hit a stone buried in the alkali and he halted a moment, boogery. Then he came on again, a little faster now as if to get it over. Ed pushed his right hand out a few inches above the tied-down holster, fingers extended rigidly. In a moment, with his other hand, he would go for that shoulder rig beneath his frock coat. He was left-handed anyway. The kid would have his attention riveted on the right hand. It would be simpler that way. Ed had no idea of letting this ranny burn him down by any lucky break. But—he slowed his own pace as he drew abreast of the shut-up blacksmith's barn. But this Frabee reminded him so much of how he'd been in that first gunfight.

"All right, you dirty lowdown—" Frabee's mouth wrenched some fifteen feet away as his rage choked off his voice.

Ed flicked the left hand up for the coat lapel, for that .32 beneath it. And Red Frabee was wide-legged in the dust and hooking for the hogleg on his batwing leather chap leg. It hit Ed in that tension-fraught instant; the ranny had known he would go left-handed for the unseen gun. The ranny knew who he was drawing against!

Ed's gun jumped out as the kid's swept up level, but Ed was rocking sideward, calmly drawing bead. The first bullet hissed by his head but high. He shot. As he intended, his slug nicked Frabee in the lower left leg; Frabee went down to a knee, but he threw lead again gamely. Ed hadn't counted on that. A third slug knifed through the flesh of his left forearm, knocking the gun from his grasp. As he yanked at the leg holster, he darted sideward and across the gutter to a tree.

"Quit, Frabee—or I'll drill you plumb dead center!"

But the freckle-faced ranny was a bitter-ender. He had scuttled crab-fashion to behind a horse trough down the line on the same side of the street. Part of his head and a shoulder came around the corner of it. Ed sent a slug that gouged a chunk of wood from the other side of the trough with his second gun. He had suddenly decided, a few seconds before, that he couldn't kill the rash button. It would be blasting his unlived life, all his chances, just as Ed's own had been ruined when he tangled with that judge. He didn't want to kill a nervy kid like that.

The latter's gun barked and a slice of bark jumped from the tree over Ed's head. Then there was a roar as a stocky figure hopped out of an alley behind Frabee. A lawman's star glittered on his calfskin vest.

"Red Frabee—pen them hoglegs afore I larrup your britches all the way home, by grab!"

Frabee twisted his head back, then looked around at Ed behind the tree again. The lawman came running up behind him. A quick swipe of his Colts barrel and the ranny rolled over limply from a glancing blow over the back of the head. . .

AFTER they had carried the half-conscious Frabee down to the little jailhouse to cool off, Lockert, the lawman Justice of the Peace,

stepped up to Ed at the honky tonk bar. He extended his hand.

"Right glad, Queen, you didn't plug the kid serious-like. . . He's just plumb hot-headed. And you know, the dangfool chunkhead had the idee you was Blackie Gerry the outlaw." The lawman chuckled at that.

Ed chuckled too. But a little later as he rode down the southwest trail out of town with Big Joey and Tex, his sensitive face was sad.

"Don't know why yuh didn't burn down the damn pelican, boss," Big Joey growled. "He might uh nailed yuh with a lucky shot! Hell, yuh ain't a-going to convince me you didn't just nick him on purpose, Ed!"

Ed shrugged as he drew deep on the quirly in his mouth. He was thinking of that young Frabee back there, a kid with his whole future before him, inside the Law. Edward "Black" Gerry, outlaw and one of the deadliest gunslingers to ever come out of the Wasita, was envious of young Frabee. . .

(THE END)

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MAKE WAY FOR A GUNMAN

By Cliff Campbell

Whenever there's danger, a leader will come out of the common ranks . . .

OLD JIM FALCON had tamed a town twenty years before. There had been peace then, for two decades—but now that town would need taming again. The peaceful era had come to a crashing end with the roar of six-guns, out there on the town's main street. Jim Falcon stood in the doorway of his cabinet shop, one scrawny hand braced against the door-casing, the other rubbing his thin, whiskery jaw.

"Young Hank is dead, Mattie," he said shakily, speaking to the elderly woman standing beside him. Mattie Falcon had seen her husband tame this town—as he had brought the law into other towns, there in the days when they had been younger, and their flesh and muscle stronger, quicker. This came rushing up on her now, as it was rushing in on her husband's memory. She looked at the Bar Y gunman who stood with his legs spread wide, jacking two spent bullets from his Colt .44. She had seen men of this man's stamp and ilk before, and she had seen Jim Falcon kill some of these men.

She said, praying, "Lord, help us. . . ."

"The only thing that can help Mill Iron," said Jim Falcon slowly, "is a young, strong man with a fast gun."

His eyes were cold as he watched the man on the street; they hid the movements, the disturbances, of his thoughts.

He had not seen the actual shooting of young Hank Jones by Sig Christenson's hired killer. He and Mattie had been building a washbench for Mrs. Wilson when the harsh roar of six-shooters out on the main street had brought the elderly couple hurrying to the open door. And his eyes, trained by experience to every angle of tragedy and conflict, had quickly re-enacted on a mental screen the action that had just transpired.

Evidently, Hank Jones had just come from the Mercantile store. Sig Christenson's gunman had come from out of Christenson's saloon, the Lucky Angel. There had been low talk from the gunman—insulting talk—and this had driven proud Hank Jones to reach for the pistol on his hip. But he had been slow, for already his hands had been shaped to the contour of a plow-handle; Sig Christenson's gunman had murdered him.

"Maybe Hank isn't dead." Mattie's voice was hopeful.

Gaunt Jim Falcon shook his gray head. "No, Mattie, when a man like that gunman shoots, he knows where each bullet will go, and he places them where they will kill."

Mattie's seamed, wrinkled face was frightened. "But Jim, when Martin Jones hears of this—his son's death—He's proud, and he'll want to kill this Christenson man, and then—"

"Martin Jones will be dead."

A crowd of townsfolk and saloon hanger-ons were gathering around the prone youth. Jim Falcon started forward; his wife's hand held him. "Jim, you'll just get into trouble. Your temper. . . ."

"I haven't a gun," said Jim Falcon simply. "If I did carry one, I couldn't shoot it." Arthritis had turned his hands into thin, twisted members. He did not glance down at them, for they could scarcely hold a hammer let alone a heavy Colt. "I'll hold my temper, Mattie."

She stood in the doorway while he went to the crowd. The Christenson man had drawn to one side, standing alone. He turned then and walked toward the Lucky Angel. Sig Christenson stood in front of his saloon and the gunman nodded slightly and went inside the saloon.

DOC SMITHERS was kneeling beside the youth. Old Jim Falcon looked down at the kid and tried to keep his anger down. Hank Jones was about eighteen—no, he was nineteen—; a grinning, happy young devil. Many times, right after Jim Falcon and Mattie had moved to Mill Iron, Martin Jones and his wife, now dead, would leave little Hank with them, while they bought supplies for their farm along the foothills to the east. Even then, as a baby, Hank had had that infectious grin. Jim Falcon tried not to think of that grin, because that smile was stilled now forever by a gunman's bullet.

Doc Smithers got to his feet. He was a thin man, nervous and jerky of movements. "He's dead," he said.

"Damn it to hell," said a man in the crowd.

Jim Falcon felt the tension in these people, but he knew it would die before it reached its apex. They were townspeople and a few neighboring farmers; they had known the ways of peace for many years—because Jim Falcon and his guns had bought this peace for them. Suddenly, Jim Falcon knew that they were looking at him again, and though nobody voiced it, they were depending on him to bring them through.

The thought both amused him and hurt him. The amusement lay in the irony of it; and in that irony also was an innate bitterness. But Time had worked its slow, subtle alchemy on him—as it does on every man—and it had brought the arthritis that had twisted his hands, ruined his coordination. And in this change lay the part that hurt.

Sig Christenson came through the gathering. He was a short man with a corpulent body and a thick, red neck. His heavy lips had the usual

cigar poked into them. He wore one gun—a Colt .45—and he had it tied down. But Jim Falcon, trained to the way of the gunman, had noticed that he also carried a hideout gun under his left shoulder. The bulge in his blue suit-coat showed that to Jim.

"Too bad," said Christenson. "But the kid should have known better than to call a man like Lee Boynton. Personal grudge, I guess, from a poker game a few nights ago. Has anybody gone out to notify his father?"

Somebody said, "Pinky James rode out to tell Martin Jones."

Sig Christenson noded, wordlessly. He ran quick eyes around, watching this group carefully, feeling out its mood, its temper. Jim Falcon saw that glance. And he saw, too, that it rested the longest on him. But even at that, the interval was not long, for Cristenson dismissed him early.

"I hope Martin Jones doesn't do anything dangerous," said Sig Christenson. He had the mood of the crowd now, and he had read it rightly: there was no danger here. Jim Falcon felt a lonesomeness, a sudden drop in spirits, and he laid it on the grim altar of Time. Already men were moving back to their former tasks—the tasks they had been doing when the rap of guns had pulled them outside. Sig Christenson turned and walked toward the Lucky Angel, walking with his heavy tread—walking seemingly in deliberation. Jim Falcon looked at the massive retreating back, and saw there was strength in that. Someday this man would die, and Jim Falcon thought that death would be violent, for it would take a young man's courage and a young man's coordination.

Doc Smithers said, "Somebody had better talk to Martin Jones, Jim."

Jim Falcon said, "Yes, Doc." He added, "But it won't do any good. He has pride, and pride is a dangerous thing to own when you're old and your muscles are weak."

Doc Smithers was ponderingly silent. He had seen this town grow, too—he had come here a stripling out of medical school, he had delivered Hank Jones. He had seen violence and violence's contemporaries, death and destruction. And he had seen also the resultant of this trio: the sorrow that followed.

"We need a young man," the doctor said. "A brave young man. . . . like you once were, Jim Falcon."

"A man will come," said Jim Falcon.

"You seem certain."

"Whenever there's danger, there'll be a leader to come out of the common ranks. History has shown that time and time again. When Custer was twenty-one, he was in the first battle of Bull Run. He came up, fast, because people needed his courage, the man's strength. That he died on the Little Big Horn is not tragedy, Doc—he had run out his span."

"Fatalism, Jim."

"You can call it that. You can call it anything you want. But a man will come, Doc, a young man—and he'll kill Sig Christenson."

"Let's hope it's soon," said Doc Smithers.

OLD Jim Falcon turned and went back to his shop. Mattie still stood in the door, and now she was crying quietly, her shoulders thin and bunched. He had the impression then that she wept not only for young Hank Jones, but also for old Martin Jones. Because Martin Jones had pride, and that pride might bring about his death.

"Come inside, mother," he said.

They had had no children, but the town's kids had always called her mother; he had taken this up, it fitted his tongue and it fitted her. She sat on the cot, still crying, and she said, "I can't stop, Jim. I just can't—"

He went outside to his lumber room behind his shop. They were carrying Hank Jones into the hardware store where Bernie Mathews would prepare the youth for his grave. The body was limp and it sagged between the two men. He

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watched until they carried him inside and then he entered his lumber room. He had his supplies stocked in neat piles and he took down some oak he had shipped in on the railroad. The hardwood was almost two inches thick and twelve inches wide. He carried two of the boards in, feeling the pull of gravity on them, and when he came into the shop Mattie had stopped crying. She helped him lay the oak on his work bench.

"I think I'd better go home, Jim," she said.

He looked at her. "You'll be all right?"

"An old lady cries easily," she said. She stood and looked at the oak planks, and he knew she was close to tears again. "You'll be home at the usual time for supper, won't you?"

"Yes."

After she had gone, he cut the oak planks into seven foot lengths, making four pieces from the two. He adjusted the depth-gauge on his rabbet plane and then, using furniture clamps, he tightened one of the planks securely on his bench. The lumber was finished; he did not have to resurface it; he had to only run a lap seam down the side to make it fit securely to the bottom plank.

The work was hard; the oak tough. He had to rest a number of times because of the ache in his upper arm muscles. And as he worked, he let his thoughts run out. Usually they darted here and there: bringing to mind old bits of verse, old stories he had heard, old scenes he had once enacted. But today, more than ever before, his thoughts were grouped around the town of Mill Iron.

Sig Christenson had bought the Lucky Angel almost two years before. He had come into town on the local passenger that ran out from the main railroad twice a week. Jim Falcon had been at the depot when Sig Christenson had stepped down, suitcase in hand. And to him had fallen the dubious honor of being the first Mill Iron man to talk to Sig Christenson.

(Continued On Page 96)

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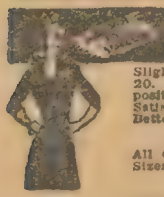

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(Continued From Page 94)

Christenson had bought the Bar Y from a Denver real-estate concern. He had, he said, been through this country about ten years before; he had liked it then and, when he had heard the Bar Y was for sale, he had bought it. That bit of information about his past, and his actions, had been the only information Mill Iron had ever received about Sig Christenson.

Soon after that, Jack Harding had talked about selling the Lucky Angel, and Sig Christenson had outbid Mike Maloney. Harding had gone east to live with a married daughter; Christenson had gathered a group around him by that time and Jim Falcon had seen the first stirrings of trouble. For these men were arrogant, as was their boss—they had tasted of trouble, and they had liked the taste. And, because of that, they had acquired an appetite, and that appetite would needs be sated. Only trouble would take the edge from it, and for this reason Sig Christenson paid their wages.

There was greed in this man. Already he was buying up the range and ripping out fences, intending to make the valley one big cattle ranch. The story was an old one, and almost every part of the west had seen a similar play—Hank and Martin Jones had owned most of the water, and Christenson had needed this water to realize his ambitions. But Hank and Martin Jones would not sell, and they would not run—and because they would do neither, Sig Christenson had drawn a line across them and marked them. And so young Hank had been the first to die.

BERNIE MATHEWS came in and asked, "How long will it take, Jim?"

Jim Falcon laid down his plane and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "I'll have the coffin finished come tomorrow morning, Bernie. You'd better keep the body in your shop until then. If we had a marshal I suppose we'd have an inquest over the killing, but seeing that we

(Continued On Page 98)

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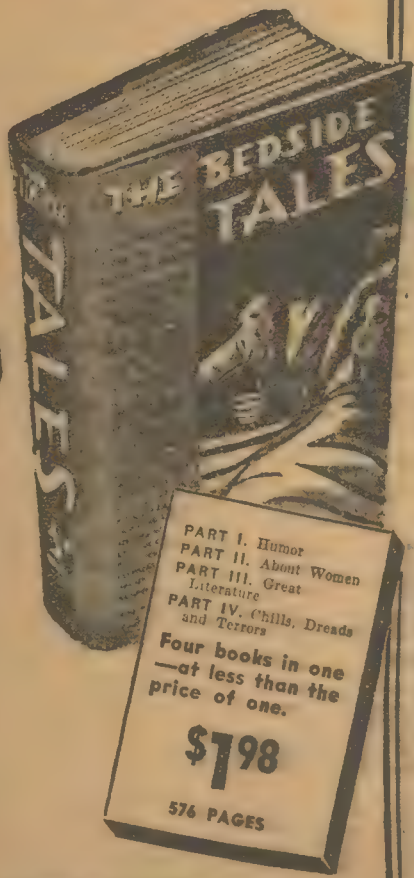

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(Continued From Page 96)

haven't a marshal I guess there's nothing we can do."

Bernie Mathews let his shoulders fall. He too had seen this town germinate, grow; he watched it die with sullen eyes. "The verdict would clear Lee Boynton, Jim; Hank went for his gun first. Of course, Boynton drove him into the action, but that still clears Boynton. Sig Christenson picks his men well, Jim."

"Is Martin Jones in town yet?"

"Not that I know of, Jim." Mathews went to the door and looked across this town, and then he said savagely, "Damn it to hell, Jim," and he walked out, crusing the yellow, dusty street. Jim Falcon returned to the task at hand.

The oak was dry and cut cleanly under his sharp plane, the odor of it clean and sweet. They had had George Blain as marshal but a Christenson man had killed him, and nobody else would take the badge. As a result, for over a year they had been without a man to represent law and order. George had been honest and strong of character, but his hand had been too slow; because of that they had buried him.

Carefully, Jim worked the bead down smooth. He cut a dado along the bottom. This was even harder work and he had to rest many times. Finally the job was done and he threaded the lap seam into that of the other plank after running glue along the edges. He put the two planks between clamps and left them on the clamp rack.

His back ached. He went to the door and looked out across the late afternoon sunlight. A few of the farmers and cattlemen had left town, but most of them still remained. Normally they would have gone home hours ago but this was no normal day. They stood in groups in front of the stores and the feed barn and talked, and over it all rang the sodden pounds of steel on hot iron down at the blacksmith shop. He went back to his work.

An hour later, Sig Christenson and Lee Boynton entered. Lee Boynton

stopped just inside the door and braced his back against the wall, falling into his quick deceptiveness. He went where Sig Christenson went because he drew Christenson's wages. Nobody knew whether he had respect or disrespect for the man he called boss, for Lee Boynton was close-mouthed and watched the parade with a studied indifference. He had one great like in his life: poker. Because he liked poker, and because he had brains, he was a good hand at the game of chance. Christenson was also a good hand with the cards; he and Boynton between them had trimmed a number of customers loose from fat wallets. Possibly this pair had disagreements over other matters, but during a poker game these grievances were temporarily postponed.

Sig Christenson asked, "Almost through with that coffin, Falcon?"

"By tomorrow noon," said Jim Falcon. "Why ask, Christenson?"

Christenson switched his cigar to the other corner of his mouth. "Thought maybe I'd pay for it. Hit it lucky in a poker game last night, so I feel generous today."

Jim Falcon wasn't as angry as he was disgusted. "That'll be for Martin Jones to decide, Christenson. Young Hank was Martin's son so Martin will go the cost of this coffin."

"Then you won't take any money?"

'Not from you; and I probably won't take any from Martin, either. Maybe you can't understand my attitude, Christenson." Jim Falcon was going to say more, then checked his words. Mattie was right. He had a temper and sometimes it ran away with him. It had been the only personal trait he had never fully conquered in a lifetime devoted much to self control.

Christenson was studiously dangerous. Boynton's head was back, resting against the wall; the smoke was expelled slowly from his lungs. Christenson's small eyes were sharp, shrewd; they had keen edges.

"You're an old man, Falcon," he said quietly. He turned and said, "Let's get out of here, Boynton," and

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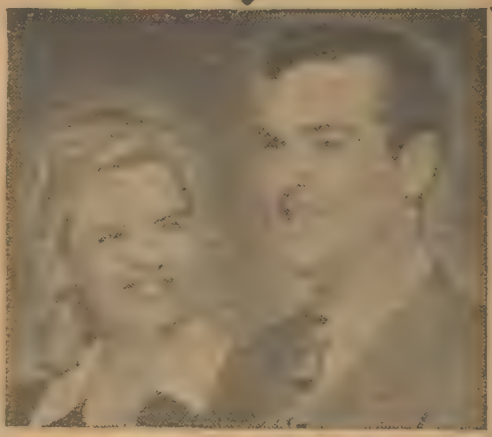

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the gunman came lazily erect, still holding to his slow deceptiveness. He came in behind Christenson and they went outside. Jim Falcon heard their boots on the sidewalk outside and then this sound fell back and was heard no longer.

THE smell of cooking came through the back door from the Pheasant Restaurant across the alley. Falcon glanced at his clock and saw that it was time to go home for supper. He laid his tools aside and locked the front and rear door. He used to leave his ship unlocked most of the time but a few weeks before Sonny Monroe had slipped in and cut himself on a chisel, so after that he had locked the shop.

Almost all of the farmers and their families were gone. That fact brought a frown across his wrinkled forehead. When he went past the Bootstrap saloon, he saw Pinky James inside, drinking with some friends at the bar. He went inside and put his hand on the cowpuncher's shoulder.

"Did you see Martin Jones, Pinky?"

"He wasn't at home, Jim. I rode over on Hang crick to see if he was there, but he wasn't and I talked with Francis Dvorack who said Martin had ridden down to the Rough crick country to look for horses and he won't be back for two days, anyway. I guess you'll have to hold the funeral of his son before he gets back. Francis said he'd saddle right up and go look for Martin but you know that Rough crick country and the badlands over there—Francis might never find him."

"We'll have to bury Hank tomorrow. Bernie Mathews can lay a body out but he can't embalm and we can't wait that long."

"Well, what can we do, Jim?"

Jim Falcon thought. "Nothing but wait, I guess."

BERNIE MATHEWS and Doc Smithers sat on the plank bench in front of Doc's office, and Bernie lifted his hand and signified

(Continued On Page 102)

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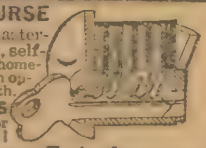

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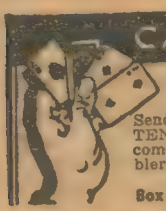

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(Continued From Page 100)

that Jim sit there too. They were silent for some time—three old men in the backwash of time, caught by their days and physical limitations. They had seen this town for many years and their fingers had felt the pulse of it. And because of their long experience, they knew now that this town was sick. They knew the men and women and children, and their hearts were heavy with this knowledge.

Doc Smithers stirred, said, "Well, we might be able to do something before Martin Jones rides into town. But I don't know what it would be."

"Jim," said Bernie Mathews, "why in the hell did you have to grow old?"

There was humor in that, and each had his laughter. Jim Falcon got to his feet and said, "Well, you old crowbaits, I could ask you the same. . . .but I won't. Mattie'll have something to eat for us if we go down to the house."

"Just ate," said Doc Smithers. "Pheasant grub. Ground-up anvils and baking powder. No wonder my belly's going to hell. Thanks, Jim."

"Me, too," said Bernie. "I just stuffed the wrinkles out of my belly at the same joint."

Jim Falcon looked at the rider who was just coming into town. At first, the horse attracted his attention. He was a small sorrel, thin of barrel, thin of legs. He came at an easy-riding running-walk and Jim saw the brand on him. A Quarter Circle Nine S, and that iron didn't fit this region. Jim thought back, trying to recognize and place the brand, but he couldn't. Then, from long habit, he studied the rider, trying to catalog him as to habits, as to mildness, or as to inclination toward danger.

He was, he judged, a young man—about twenty-five. He stepped down and he was not tall, nor was he too short. He was chunky with heavy shoulders and thick hips. His hair was straw-colored and his blue eyes were separated by a stubby nose that sported a few freckles.

"Howdy, men," he said. "I want to feed my horse, and then feed my-

self. What do you say, mister?" He was looking at Jim Falcon.

"Livery barn down the street, stranger. And the Pheasant restaurant will mix you a bite to eat. Not first class grub, but it will pass in a pinch. Come far?"

"Not too far. From around Placerville. Been playing the gold strike over there, but the dust petered out. Thanks for the information." The man went down the street, leading his sorrel, and animal and man went into the livery barn.

"Nice young fellow, looked like," said Doc Smithers.

Jim Falcon nodded, and went to his home. The coolness of the log house rushed out to meet him and brush aside the heat of the dying day. He sat back in his chair, looking at the clean blue tablecloth, and he felt the coolness of the silverware. The meal was simple but sufficient.

After eating, he helped Mattie with the dishes. He sat for a short time and rested, then walked through the coolness of the evening toward his shop. The day's heat was lifting from the parched land. Frogs were croaking from the rushes and grass that lined the irrigation ditches on the outskirts of Mill Iron.

He lit his kerosene lamp and went to work. The hours droned by as he sawed and fitted, planed and joined the parts. By nine o'clock he had the entire coffin set into clamps and glued. By morning the glue would be dry and he and Mattie would assemble it and line it and cover it. A grim task but an indispensable one.

He was tired, and it was an old man's tiredness—the weariness that has accumulated over the years, that settles in you and saps you. But yet, mingled with this fatigue, was a sort of unrest, a need that demanded he move and walk and talk. Accordingly he went to the Lucky Angel.

He ordered a glass of beer. Doc Smithers left his table and came to the bar, carrying his glass. He said, "You're up late, Jim."

"A little after nine," replied Jim Falcon. Forsome reason the statement nettled him. Hel, just 'cause a man was late in his years it was no sign

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he had to hit the roost with the chickens. "And you, Doc?"

"You're a long time dead," said the medico. He turned and put his back to the bar, his eyes heavy with unvoiced thoughts. "There's the makings of a good poker game, Jim."

SIG CHRISTENSON and Lee Boynton were gambling at a table with the young cowboy who had just ridden into town that evening. The young fellow leaned back in his chair once, and Jim Falcon saw that he had pulled his gun from holster and stuck it into his front, putting it barrel-down in his belt. And again Jim Falcon got the impression that, this quiet man was tough and that he could take care of himself in a tight.

Quite a crowd was building up around the table. The stranger had a stack of gold pieces in front of him and besides these was a poke of gold-dust. Neither Christenson nor Boynton were using chips, either. Each man had a stack of gold pieces beside him. Christenson ran his blunt, heavy fingers up and down his stack, making the gold click a little. Boynton was quiet and thoughtful.

A percentage girl—not more than seventeen—came up to Boynton. "Drink honey?" she asked.

Boynton said, without looking from his cards, "Get away, Joan. No, no whiskey. Stay away, too."

The girl colored slightly. Then she said, "To hell with you," and walked off, showing off her back to the men assembled around the table. Christenson lifted slow eyes from his cards and said, "You talk rough to your women, Boynton."

Boynton said, "Yes, maybe," and then, to the stranger, "Two cards, fellow." He got the cards and threw his hand into discard with disgust. Boynton leaned back and rolled a cigaret, his eyes on the two players on either side. Jim Falcon saw that he, too, carried his gun under his belt. Nobody at this table was drinking and nobody was without alertness. There would be high stakes here when the night pulled on. And the stranger was in tough company.

(Continued On Page 106)

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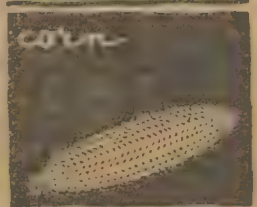

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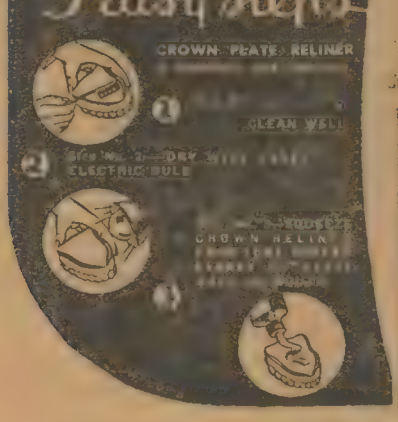

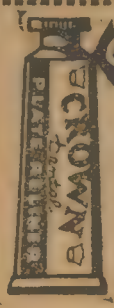

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(Continued From Page 104)

He looked at Jim Falcon then: a straight look, and he nodded slightly. Jim nodded back, and the stranger swung his eyes down again. He took the pot with three kings to Christenson's pair of jacks, tossed the cards to Boynton. "Deal them good," he said.

Boynton handled cards like he handled a gun: he was fast. He rifled the cards out but Jim Falcon had little interest in Boynton. He went outside where he met Bernie Mathews.

"Coffin almost finished, Jim?"

"It'll be together first thing in the morning. You can have it by ten."

Bernie Mathews nodded and said, "All right," and then said, after a while, "See you in the morning," and went toward his home.

Jim Falcon went to the outskirts of town. Here the road ran across the irrigation ditch and he stood and looked down at the muddy, surly water moving and gurgling through the earth fill. The dank, wet smell of growing cat-tails and rushes came to his nostrils and felt the cool touch of the night. He stood there for some time, thinking thoughts only he could understand, and then he went home and to bed. But sleep was slow to come.

NEXT MORNING Mill Iron talked of two things: the funeral of Hank Jones and the poker game the night before. For the slow-speaking young stranger had trimmed Sig Christenson and Lee Boynton. . . and trimmed them badly. Both were looking forward to the resumption of the game that afternoon or evening.

Jim Falcon's hands were clumsy claws as he nailed the glued-up pieces into place. A number of times he dropped the hammer. He realized that his arthritis was getting so bad he could not work much longer. He would have to hire some younger man to run his shop or sell it to him.

Mattie had bought black linen at the Mercantile. She lined the coffin and fitted the linen to the outside of it. A few minutes after ten, Bernie Mathews and his oldest son came and, without a word, they lifted it and carried it to their establishment. Mattie

went home to get a bite of dinner ready and to change clothes. Jim Falcon walked down the street to see Doc Smithers. The young stranger stood in front of the Pheasant picking his teeth.

"Funeral today?" he asked, respectfully.

Jim told him about the death of Hank Jones under the gun of Lee Boynton. The stranger was quiet and studious, the gravity of his thoughts in his eyes. Finally he said, "Boynton and Christenson are the town's bad boys, is that right?"

"You made no error, mister."

The man nodded, seemingly dismissing the subject and the talk. Doc Smithers was out on a call and Jim Falcon went home where he ate and sat on the porch, and watched the town. When one-thirty came he went to the church with Mattie, but they did not join the procession that followed the coffin to the cemetery. The sun was too hot and the distance too far.

The stranger stood in front of the hotel, watching the pallbearers and the coffin and mourners pass. He had taken off his stetson and he held it across his chest. When Jim and Mattie came by, he nodded to them gravely and with concern, but was silent.

"Who is that young man?" asked Mattie. Her husband told her what he knew about the stranger, and she said: "He knows how to handle a gun, Jim."

"You've got that eye, too huh?"

She said, almost wearily, "I've seen them, Jim, and you've seen them—" She was looking back across Time and men were moving across that space. Men she and her husband had known and had helped or hindered according to their viewpoints on life. "So he's the poker player, is that it?"

Jim Falcon nodded.

Mattie was tired and she changed clothes and sat on the porch. Jim Falcon went to the Lucky Angel. Men were coming back from the funeral and, because the Lucky Angel was the only bar in town, they were forced to enter it for drinks and conviviality. Jim Falcon's feet hurt and he took a seat, where Bernie Mathews

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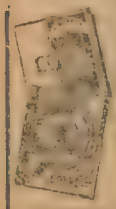

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found him. They talked little, and that talk was of small moment.

Most of the men were waiting for the poker game. It started at nine. And again, the stranger was winning—winning steadily. Boynton was drinking but Christenson was sober, stone sober. Neither did the stranger touch a drink.

He sat with his back to the wall. About ten, after losing heavily, Boynton started his tantalizing talk, and the stranger told him once to keep quiet. Christenson, too, told his cohort to shut up or get out..

BOYNTON WAS silent then, nursing his cards and his temper. Word evidently went out that there was trouble in the wind, and more men came in to watch and speculate. Boynton kept on losing and so did Christenson, and thousands of dollars were building up in front of the stranger. They were moving across the green-topped table, coming from the stacks of Boynton and Christenson, and going to the stranger.

Jim Falcon leaned against the bar opposite the stranger, watching every move. A young man would come and a young man would do a young man's job. . . . Martin Jones would ride in from Rough creek and Martin Jones would buckle on his gun. . . These added up and found their sum, but Jim Falcon did not know what that sum would be, or what it would read.

Christenson lifted his eyes, unknown to Boynton, and nodded to the little percentage girl, who came up and put her hand on Boynton's shoulder. "Buy me a drink, Lee," she said, "and it will change your luck."

Boynton growled, "Get away, woman."

She said, quietly, "Please, Lee."

He brought his left arm around, pushing her back. She hit the wall beside the stranger, almost fell against him, but she finally recovered her balance. Her eyes were blazing and her words were harsh.

"Why, you, damned tinhorn—"

Boynton started from his chair.

The stranger said, quickly, "Sit down, Boynton, or I'll sit you down."

(Continued On Page 110)

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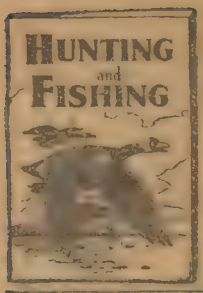

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Western Action

(Continued From Prage 108)

Jim Falcon heard and he knew there was danger ahead. "Get out of here, Miss, quick, 'cause there's trouble ahead."

The girl ran from the room; Boynton leaned his hands flat against the table, the fingers spread out, and he said, "What did you say to me, Mister? Were you trying to order Lee Boynton around?"

The stranger looked at Sig Christenson. "Better call your rat terrier off me, Christenson, or I'll kill him."

Sig Christenson's eyes were pondering. Jim Falcon knew that in his nod was the power to either make or discard trouble. If he told Boynton to sit down; then Boynton would sit down. But if he gave Boynton the go-ahead signal, then there would be gun-play.

Jim Falcon saw Sig Christenson glance at the stranger's pile of gold. And Jim Falcon knew, then, what Sig Christenson's answer would be.

"He's his own boss," said Christenson.

The clatter of gold pieces was the next thing Jim Falcon heard. The table came up and back, bulled savagely by the stranger's boots, and Sig Christenson missed his first shot. Jim Falcon stood to one side and realized, suddenly, he was thinking that the roar of guns, blending together that way, made a pounding dull sound, greater in concussion than in power. He had never noticed that when he had been involved, for he had put that outside of him and concentrated only on his enemy.

Christenson had sagged against the bar, sitting like a bent, filled sack, his head resting on his massive chest. He slid slowly to one side and lay in a grotesque fashion. The table rested across the back of Lee Boynton, who lay on his belly with his face in the sawdust. Had he been alive he could never have breathed.

The stranger stood with his back against the wall, grinning a little too tightly. Jim Falcon moved close to him and said, quietly, "Take it easy, fellow. The rest of us are your friends."

The man looked at Jim Falcon. Then he sheathed his gun. He said.

(Continued On Page 112)

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(Continued From Page 110)

"Thanks, old timer," and added, "There's quite a bit of money on the floor in that sawdust. I take it that it's all mine, seeing those other two pushed my hand. I'd oblige you if you would take care of it and find it while I step outside."

Doc Smithers said, "We'll get it for you, stranger, and you'll get every cent." He had already examined Sig Christenson and found him dead. "You sure you're all right, Mister?"

"Just need some air, thanks."

Jim Falcon and the young man went outside. The stranger leaned against a hitchrack and Jim Falcon waited, patiently, understandingly. He said, soothingly, "Just take it easy and get a grip on yourself. I know how you feel, fellow. This town will never forget you for what you did tonight."

"Got a drink."

Jim Falcon had taken a bottle from the bar. The stranger drank and Jim Falcon thought of many things. He had been right. Man always had to fight for what he wanted, but some were too old to fight, and therefore the young fought for them. When a town, or a nation, needed a leader that leader would come. He would be strang and be young, and because of him there would be peace.

(THE END)

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